WHICH?

JUNE 2003

| Plasma TV guide | Video mobile | One-use cameras | Money transfers | Sandwiches | Child car seats |

Which brands will win out in our marathon tests? Plus company ethics examined

RUNNING SHOES

SOLD OUT

How estate agents are failing both buyers and sellers

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SEE PAGE 3

SIZZLING BEST BUYS

Barbecues on test

MOBILE ROAMING

SAVE
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Cut your costs when travelling or phoning abroad

For instant access to expert advice, go to > > > > > > www.which.co.uk/whichextra

WHICH?

Our promise to you
Which? is owned and produced by Consumers' Association (CA). It aims to help you choose the best goods and services – and avoid the worst. It's entirely independent – we take no ads, no freebies, and everything we test is paid for at full price. Since 1957, Which? and CA have informed, influenced and campaigned for all consumers in the UK.

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Uncovered: estate agents who are selling you short

Weekends have meant house-hunting for me recently, and the variation in service between estate agents has been marked. Skimpy, uninformative house details and a general unwillingness to follow through on mailing list promises have been remarkably common.

But these, at least, are the aspects of an agent's service you can judge for yourself. In an investigation for this month's *Which?*, we've found some agents using contracts with unfair small print, and others who are prepared to break the law. In one, extraordinary case, an agent lied to one of our undercover buyers by saying that a higher offer than theirs had already been rejected. And, when the same agent dealt with an undercover seller, it passed on only the lower of two offers. The lower offer came from a buyer who had agreed to opt for the agent's mortgage deal.

We've decided to take action against the worst offenders, and we'd like your help to identify more agents who aren't playing by the rules. So, if you've suffered from a confusing contract, been forced to pay commission when you don't think it's due, or come across other dirty tricks, please email us at home_truths@which.co.uk or visit which.co.uk/campaigns/hometruths for more details.

Helen Parker, **Editor**

FOR MEMBERS ONLY

WHICH? EXTRA
Your members-only website

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Which? Extra is available exclusively to you as a *Which?* magazine member. Use it to get involved and find the advice you want – fast.

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- web links directory giving access to more than 1,000 useful websites
- register for our email newsletter
- free factsheets to download
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New this month
- extra information about the ethical policies of the companies featured in our running shoes article (p19)

SHOPPING OPTIONS
Which? members can make big savings on electrical appliances, energy bills, and even on cars – thanks to our specially negotiated deals.

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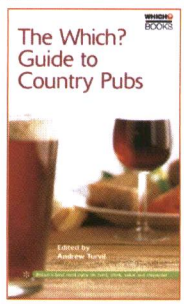
www.hughesdirect.co.uk/which

Energy bills
www.buy.co.uk/which

New cars
OneSwoop 0845 130 9192
oneswoop.com/partners/which

BOOK OFFER



The Which? Guide to Country Pubs brings together a selection of around 900 rural pubs in Britain where good food, drink, value for money and character are always on the menu. We're offering the guide for £12.99 – that's £2 off its normal price. To order, call **0800 252 100** (quote **WGCP BKOW06**). Offer closes 30 June 2003.

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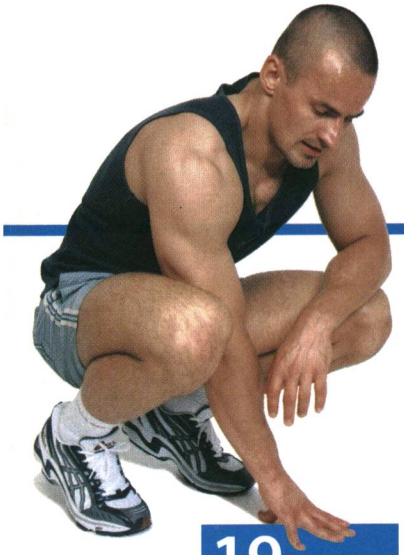

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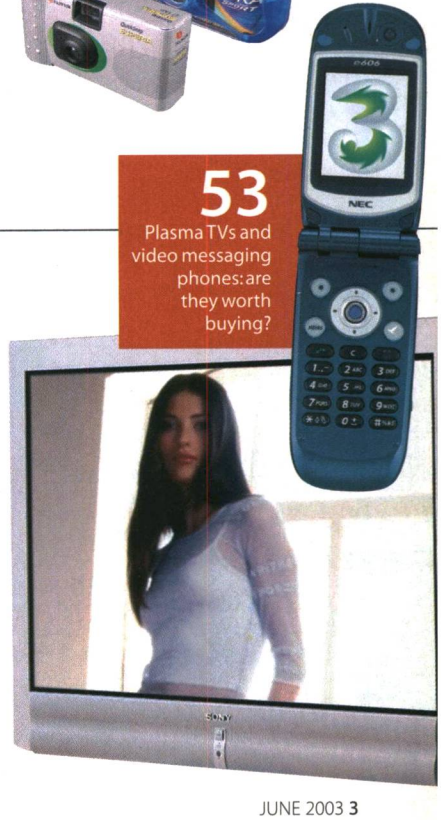


53 Plasma TVs and video messaging phones: are they worth buying?

WIN!

A BEST BUY BARBECUE

In our report, what was the average assembly time for gas barbecues?

a) 1 hour 20 min
b) 2 hours 10 min
c) 1 hour 50 min

To enter our Best Buy competition online, go to www.which.co.uk/whichextra/content/main/comp.shtml, or send your entry on a postcard to 'BB June 03', Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH – please include your name, address (and postcode), a daytime phone number and your Which? membership number, which can be found on your Which? Extra membership card as your user name. Entries from 3 June to 29 June 2003. For full competition rules, see p58.

writeback

Share your views with other members

Have your say
writeback@which.net
Writeback
PO Box 44, Hertford X
SG14 1SH

Shocking advice

Your answer to 'What a shock' ('Ask the experts', March 2003, p46) is somewhat misleading. If you touch an exposed live wire, you wouldn't suffer a fatal electric shock if an RCD were protecting the circuit. Surely the RCD would trip out before enough current could cause you harm?
Robert Matthews, by email

This issue has generated interest from several readers. The response we gave concerned one specific scenario. But we admit we should have made it clearer that, if you touch a live wire, the RCD will stop you getting a potentially fatal electric shock. It's not certain that a fatal shock will occur even without an RCD – but we'd always advocate using an RCD when using electrical tools in the garden.

No points for us

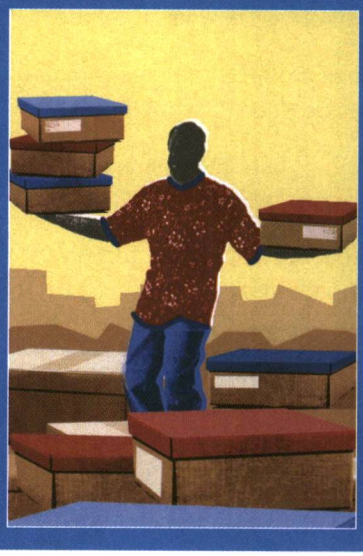
In 'Poor value points schemes' (March 2003, p24), you don't mention which credit cards give an extra year or two's warranty on top of the year from the manufacturer.
Paul Hatton, Birmingham

The following cards give one extra year: Barclaycard Gold and Platinum, NatWest Gold, Woolwich Open Plan, Nationwide Cash Reward, Classic, Reward Gold and Gold, Lloyds TSB Advance and Platinum, and Ulster Bank Gold. HSBC's Premier and Platinum cards give two extra years. You should always check the terms and conditions of these warranties, as not all items are included. There may also be limits on the value of the purchases that are covered.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Boxed in by sports shops

I recently bought some football boots for my son in our local branch of JJB Sports. At the counter I asked the cashier to put the boots in a bag as I didn't want the box. To my surprise, I was told that, unless I took the box, I wouldn't be able to return the goods, even if I had the receipt or another proof of purchase. I suspect this is the shop's way of getting customers to deal with unwanted packaging as surely it's not something that's required by law?
Trevor Ridley, by email



Under the Sale of Goods Act 1979, if goods are faulty, you don't need the original packaging – and you would be entitled to a refund or replacement whether or not you have the box the shoes came in. The head offices of the major sports footwear retailers, JJB Sports, JD Sports and Footlocker, told us that it isn't their policy to require customers to take their shoe boxes. In the event of any return, they just require a receipt or proof of purchase to show that the goods are theirs.

Directory enquiry

Is it true that, if you have a premium-call barring service on your phone, you won't be able to use the new heavily- advertised 118 directory enquiry numbers?
GT Weil, Birmingham

This used to be the case with BT. But BT no longer classifies 118 numbers as premium calls. So, if you make calls from a BT line, you can now access all new directory enquiry numbers, even if you have a premium-call barring service. However, if you don't have a BT line, or you use a mobile phone, you need to contact your network for advice on its policy. A list of the new directory enquiry services – and tariffs from BT lines only – can be found at www.newdirectoryenquiries.com.

Dyeing to know

Further to your March 'Inside story' item linking bladder cancer to permanent hair dye (p6), can you tell me which is the harmful chemical I should look out for?
Rita Dermody, Perivale, Middlesex

Concerns have been raised in the media about tetrahydro-6-nitroquinoxaline and para-phenylenediamine, also called 1,4-diamino benzene or p-phenylene diamine. But these concerns have not yet been substantiated. The problem lies with how the active chemicals in permanent dye react with the developer and other ingredients – and, until now, cosmetic companies have looked only at individual components. The European Commission is evaluating new research, which hopefully will lead to it publishing a list of approved chemicals. This is something we'd like to see. We'll report on this as soon as we have further information.

PLEASE GET IN TOUCH

Please send us your comments and questions. We publish some of your questions on this page and more online at www.which.co.uk/whichextra. We give £15-worth of Which? Books vouchers to the sender of our letter of the month, and £10-worth to senders of all other letters printed. We may edit letters or use only an extract.

ILLUSTRATION KEVIN EVANS

HELP WANTED

Your chance to help with research for future articles

You'll find more requests for help at www.which.co.uk/whichextra. We're sorry that we can't acknowledge all the replies we receive to our help wanted requests but we do value what you tell us – so please continue to send us your experiences.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH SCHEMES

Have you set up a Neighbourhood Watch scheme, or are you planning to set one up? We'd like to hear about your experiences, good and bad, especially if you'd be prepared to feature as a case study in our article. Dept VP.

COSMETIC SURGERY WITHOUT SURGERY

Have you ever had a non-surgical cosmetic procedure, such as Botox, collagen implants, skin peels, or laser treatments? If so, we'd like to hear about your experiences, good or bad. Please write with full details. Dept ANB.

BIKE BITS

Do you have a bicycle? If so, are there any bits and bobs you can't do without when you're cycling? Are you partial to panniers, do you have a marvellous pump, or is there an odd gadget that you'd be lost without? Dept SE.

CAR INSURANCE

Have you claimed on your car insurance recently? Did you benefit from something in the policy that you weren't expecting? Perhaps you had problems with a claim, or didn't receive the service you were expecting? Please send your experiences with as much detail as possible. Dept NN.

Email helpwanted@which.net; go to www.which.co.uk/whichextra; or write to our Hertford address, above. Include department and full contact details

Time to stop the holiday predators

Ah, the sun... the sea... the scams. This summer, don't fall prey to tricksters who've dodged timeshare rules.

The carrot of a 'free holiday' (which rarely is) has lured thousands to join unscrupulous 'holiday clubs'. These promise a lifetime of discounted luxury holidays. But what they provide – for a fee of up to £15,000 – is access to a booking service that doesn't deliver. It's estimated that UK consumers have been conned out of £40 million.

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) recently warned that you could pay over the odds for last minute, poor quality accommodation. And, all too often, holiday clubs go bust before you benefit (see 'Couple win credit card refund', below, and 'Lunch is off, sir', p60). Not all holiday clubs are unscrupulous, but last year, the OFT received 700 complaints about them – double the previous year's tally. It's investigating 100 companies. Spring and summer are peak times for the scam.

Holiday clubs aren't covered by timeshare laws, so you aren't entitled to a cooling-off period. There's another loophole: timeshare holidays on any boat aren't covered either, and sales are booming.

Father-of-three Ranjit Kalsi, from Warwickshire, attended a presentation by Shakespeare Classic Line Ltd earlier this year to collect a 'free holiday'. After a sales pitch, Ranjit signed up for a £3,250 timeshare deal on a boat and paid a £250 deposit. He says he was told there was a cooling-off period. Three days later he wrote to cancel, but the company (which claimed, falsely, to be recommended by the Timeshare Consumers Association) has refused. It denies offering a cooling-off period and has now demanded the balance.

There's no cooling-off period on boat timeshares

We want the government to extend the law, including the cooling-off period, to holiday clubs and boat timeshares, and to timeshare schemes where the contract is for less than three years; currently, these don't count as timeshare. Any other timeshare contract signed in the EU or the European Economic Area (including the Canaries, Cyprus and Malta) has a minimum ten-day cooling-off period (14 days in the UK). Until this time is up, no money should change hands. The government says it is lobbying the EU to close the timeshare loopholes.

● ACTION POINT

If you're invited to a presentation to collect a 'free holiday', the OFT says don't go.

FURTHER INFORMATION
www.oft.gov.uk Office of Fair Trading
www.timeshare.org.uk Timeshare Consumers Association

YOUR RIGHTS

COUPLE WIN CREDIT CARD REFUND

Barclaycard has finally refunded Gordon and Mary Morley more than £6,000, which they lost when a holiday club went bust, but only after *Which?* got involved.

In June 1999, the couple paid £6,960 for a share in Hever Worldwide Properties Vacation Club. The transaction was made in the UK. But later that year the company went bust and the Morleys lost their money. They'd paid the deposit with their Barclaycard, and under section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act, Barclaycard was jointly liable with the retailer for any breach of contract or misrepresentation. The Morleys contacted Barclaycard and it refunded the £696 deposit the Morleys had put on the card.

But, after reading a newspaper article, Gordon realised that Barclaycard had been liable for the full purchase price – a further £6,264 – not just the amount charged to the card. Barclaycard told Gordon that section 75 didn't apply to foreign transactions.

Further reading led Gordon to contact Barclaycard again in February, to claim the remaining amount. This time Barclaycard acknowledged that it should have paid the amount in full in the first place, because it was a UK transaction, but refused to rectify the error because of Gordon's delay. It said the £696 it had refunded in 2000 was in 'full and final settlement'.

Gordon told us. We contacted Barclaycard because we felt its decision was unfair as it had made the initial error. It agreed to a full refund and has now paid the Morleys the balance of £6,264.

The error arose because Barclaycard had assessed the claim as if the purchase was made overseas. Barclaycard's policy for claims arising from foreign transactions is to refund just the amount on the card. But Hever Worldwide Properties was a UK company and the transaction had taken place in the UK.

We feel Barclaycard's policy on foreign purchases denies consumers their rights. Most credit card companies deny that section 75 covers overseas purchases.

We agree with the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) that the law covers transactions made abroad (see 'Credit card protection still denied', May 2003, p5).

The OFT, Lloyds TSB and The Royal Bank of Scotland plan to go to the High Court to clarify the status of these transactions shortly. We'll update you.

PHOTOGRAPHY ALAMY

CONTACT INSIDE STORY

If there's something you'd like us to investigate, leave a message on the Inside Story Hotline on **0800 252088** (calls are free) or email **insidestory@which.net**. We're sorry but we can't reply individually.

CAMPAIGNING FOR YOU

CA GETS LEGAL POWERS

We become your superchampion later this month. The Enterprise Act will make Consumers' Association an official 'supercomplainer' – if we ask the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) to investigate a suspect industry, it must respond quickly. We've made a supercomplaint before – about private dentistry – but this new law gives us the legal right to do so.

We should eventually get new powers under the act to seek Stop Now Orders (injunctions) against rogues.

FAIRER HOLIDAY CONTRACTS

Holidaymakers are to get a fairer deal from Cosmos after it was rapped by the OFT.

The UK's fifth largest tour operator must change unfair small print concerning surcharges – which rose but didn't fall in line with costs – and compensation for changes and delays. For more details, see www.oft.gov.uk.

EAT CHOCOLATE...GET FAT

We think the 'eat chocolate, get fit' scheme launched by Cadbury, in which schools earn sports equipment in return for children eating its chocolate, is irresponsible.

We've called on Sports Minister Richard Caborn to withdraw his endorsement.

SWITCH SUPPLIER AND SAVE

Apathy is costing six out of ten electricity customers up to £50 a year, says the National Audit Office. This is because they've never switched. If this is you, see www.switchwithwhich.co.uk.

DIXONS RAPPED AGAIN

Misleading its customers about 'no interest' deals has got Dixons into trouble again. The store must now change its ads; if the loan isn't paid off by the end of the 'interest free' period, interest is back-dated.

Consumers' Association campaigns for all UK consumers. If you want to know more about our campaigns, go to www.which.co.uk/campaigns

AERIAL FIRMS CHARGED THREE TIMES THE COST

Two of the five TV aerial engineers charged three times too much

Two out of the five TV aerial engineers hired by undercover trading standards officers (TSOs) to fix a simple fault charged about three times too much.

Results of the visits by five aerial firms to a house rented specially, and rigged with secret cameras, are the second wave of revelations by Surrey County Council TSOs. Posing as consumers, they invited traders including plumbers, car mechanics, and TV engineers to fix specific problems. Results for these are yet to be released.

Above are the results of the aerial company visits. These companies were asked to fix a fault in a cable joint – a job that needed no parts and should have cost about £40, according to an expert. Aerial Systems, of Lingfield, Surrey, charged £115.15; and PL Downing, of Croydon, Surrey, charged £146.

We published the first results – for drain engineers who were asked to clear a blockage – in February (see 'Courageous council names cowboys', p7). Of the 12 drainage firms who visited the house, three have been prosecuted after they overcharged and lied about the work done. Abbeyplumb Ltd, based in Enfield, Middlesex, was fined £4,000; Pipewerx Drainage Solutions, of Sandleheath, Hampshire, £1,000, and Pronto Services (UK) Ltd, of Derby, £9,000.

Surrey TSOs set up the sting after receiving more than 2,300 complaints about cowboy traders in a year. Of the 72 traders asked to visit the house, some were picked at random, while others had featured in complaints. Results showed one in four were rogues. We'd like to see more councils follow Surrey's lead.

COMPANY	TIME TAKEN (MIN)	COST (£)
PL Downing, Croydon, Surrey	34	146
Aerial Systems, Lingfield, Surrey	30	115.15
RB Installations, West Wickham, Kent	46	104.57
Aerial Associates, Cobham, Surrey	20	41.12
PK Aerials, Ashford, Middlesex	14	35

'BARGAIN' HOLIDAYS? PIE IN THE SKY

A huge number of travel offers on websites and in agents' windows were nothing more than hot air, two recent investigations by trading watchdogs found.

The travel industry is famous for its so-called 'smoke and mirrors' prices. In April, the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) revealed that 40 per cent of 135 UK-based travel websites examined in a trawl made dubious claims.

These included 'hot deals' on the front page of a site which bore no resemblance to the price of available holidays; an advert offering 'Australia from £599', when the cheapest price was £891.60, and promises of discounts but no mention of how to get them. These are being investigated under misleading advertising rules. The UK trawl was part of a worldwide sweep of travel sites in 24 countries. Globally, more than 1,000 problem sites were identified.

Separately, trading standards officers (TSOs) in Greater Manchester, Blackpool and Blackburn recently checked deals in 47 travel agents' windows and found 70 per cent of the offers were wrong, mainly because the holiday either wasn't available, or was more expensive than the offer price (though some were cheaper).

In one case, a national travel agent's window displayed a 14-night holiday to Ibiza for a family of three, for £1,126 – but the price was in fact £321 higher. The window advert hadn't been checked for five days.

It's a criminal offence to advertise a holiday that isn't available, or to give a false or misleading price. No action is planned this time, but the survey will be repeated and offenders prosecuted next time.

When we investigated offers in travel agents' windows ('So much for bargain holidays', January 2000, p16) only one third of the holidays we asked about were available at the price in the window. If travel agents can't keep window adverts accurate, they should stop advertising in this way.

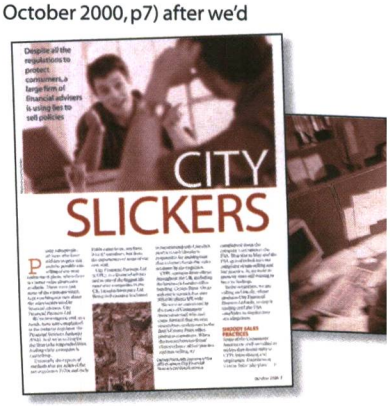
YOUR CHAMPION

LINCOLN ASSURANCE

Lincoln Assurance has been fined £485,000 by the financial regulator for the mis-selling of savings plans by former financial advisers City Financial Partners Limited (CFPL).

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) said that Lincoln did not adequately monitor CFPL and so failed to ensure that the savings plans it was selling were suitable for customers. The FSA also acknowledged the role *Which?* played in exposing the mis-selling.

Our investigation first highlighted CFPL's appalling practices nearly three years ago (see 'City slickers', October 2000, p7) after we'd



Despite all the regulations to protect consumers, a large firm of financial advisers is using lies to sell policies

CITY SLICKERS

Government set to betray motorists

A scheme to protect consumers from shoddy garage repairs has effectively been scrapped by both the government and motoring industry.

After a massive Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) mystery shopping exercise among garages last year, which found that poor quality workmanship and overcharging were endemic, the motoring industry pledged to help set up a national good garage scheme to protect consumers. It's since back-tracked, saying that the scheme would be too expensive, and that, instead, it will beef up its codes of practice. The DTI surprised and dismayed consumer groups last month when it said that it supported this alternative approach by the motoring industry.

In 2000, the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) recommended a thorough overhaul of the garage repairs sector, and so the DTI set up a task force made up of consumer groups, including Consumers' Association, and industry representatives to come up with solutions.

The consumer groups wanted an independently run scheme, but the vehicle manufacturers and the main trade association, the Retail Motor Industry Federation, just wanted to beef up the existing codes of conduct, which aren't working at the moment. They've now got their way.

We think that the government's capitulation to the car industry is nothing less than a betrayal of the motoring public.

We'll continue to investigate this sector, and if the scheme doesn't work, we'll be looking for tough regulation to be put in place to stop rip-off garages.

PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREW WARD, ROBIN BECKHAM, GETTY IMAGES

'INED £485,000

received complaints of aggressive and pushy sales tactics. We heard that customers who'd bought or who were advised to buy products were given no explanation of costs or charges at the time – a clear breach of the rules. Some advisers were reluctant to let customers take away literature to read and consider before they agreed to buy. We handed our evidence to the FSA.

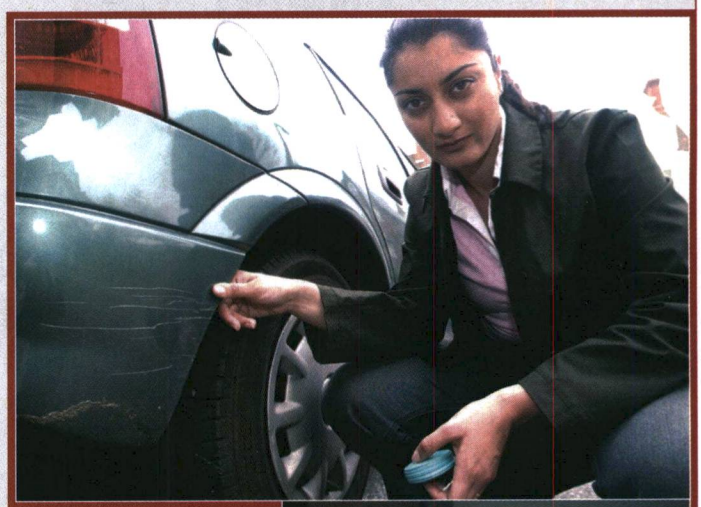
Since our report we've been contacted by dozens of people who've also been mis-sold policies by CFPL, and we've helped many get the redress they deserve.

We welcome the fine, but it relates only to the mis-selling of ten-year savings plans from September 1998 to August 2000. We believe that CFPL's mis-selling was more widespread and still want the FSA to carry out a complete review of all CFPL sales. This public acknowledgement of serious mis-selling makes this even more crucial.

CAR PARKS: A CRIMINAL'S PARADISE

More than 20 per cent of vehicle crimes happen in a car park – but just 5 per cent of UK car parks belong to a scheme for combating the problem.

The government is so disappointed with take-up of the Secured Car Park (SCP) scheme by car park operators – set up 11 years ago by the Association of Chief Police Officers – that it's threatened to name the car park crime hotspots with lax security, so you can avoid them. Of the 20,000 car parks in the UK, just 1,216 belong to the scheme. Police are so desperate to cut car park crime, in one case they threatened to ignore calls by stores in a shopping centre to attend crimes such as shoplifting – unless they tightened the security of their notorious car park. It worked.



Subi Shah's car was damaged by a fellow customer in a Tesco car park. The car park's CCTV cameras are 'for your protection' but they didn't help Subi at the critical time

Crime falls by an average of 70 per cent when a car park becomes officially secure. Measures that have to be in place to qualify include good lighting and surveillance.

Cameras trained on her car would have made all the difference to Subi Shah. Subi is about £300 out of pocket after parking her car at Tesco in Colney Hatch, London. A fellow shopper dented Subi's Vauxhall Astra while pulling out when Subi was in the store. Signs at the store entrance said: 'CCTV cameras operate in this car park for your protection'. But, unluckily for Subi, the cameras were pointing at the cashpoints, not the car park, at the crucial moment. Currently, only a 'handful' of Tesco car parks belong to the SCP scheme, and this wasn't one of them.

Tesco also had a notice in the car park disclaiming responsibility for damage not caused by its negligence. It has refused compensation.

Although Subi felt misled by the CCTV sign, Tesco's disclaimer was legal, as was its view that it wasn't liable because it hadn't been negligent.

Several car parks – some run by local councils – have been rapped by the Office of Fair Trading for notices such as 'Cars parked at owner's risk' because they duck responsibility for damage, death or injury caused by the site owner's negligence. These aren't legally binding, whether you've paid to park or not.

FURTHER INFORMATION
www.securedcarparks.com

WARNING

The risk from weak rear car seats

New tests have shown that, in a head-on crash, just four small suitcases in a car boot can cause severe injury to rear passengers if rear car seats aren't strong enough.

The test results, published by European consumer safety body ANEC, highlight the inadequacy of existing legislation for rear seat strength.

The test was designed to emulate real-life car crashes. Two cars with split, folding rear seats were loaded with four suitcases, weighing 90kg in total, and subject to a head-on crash at 40 mph. One car was picked because of its robustness. Two dummies (one adult, one child) in the back seats were used to see the effect on passengers.

In the car with the robust shell, the child dummy was harmed. In the other car, the central seat back hinges failed, allowing luggage to enter the cabin, and both dummies were harmed.

Statistics aren't collected on the numbers of people injured by rear seats failing in accidents, but experts believe that rear seat backs in cars are simply not made to withstand the force of luggage being thrown forward.

We support the call for the EU and car manufacturers to improve back seat safety standards. Meanwhile, you can limit your risk by putting heavy luggage on the floor of the boot, close to the base of the back seats. You can also tie luggage down if you have fixing points, and close rear seat belts, even if no one is in the rear seat.

For details on how child car seats cope in a crash, see our report on p34.

Rear seat passengers can be injured by flying luggage if car seats are not strong enough

'PRICIER' FISH FINGERED

The main difference between cheaper brands of baked beans and fish fingers and superior versions is price, says a new survey.

Trading standards officers (TSOs) in the East Midlands recently analysed 37 brands of fish fingers, and found economy and other types contained the same amount of fish – 61 per cent on average. The main difference was that the superior brands were made from fillets, not minced fish. The economy brands were 60 per cent cheaper than their classier-looking counterparts.

They also looked at 70 samples of baked beans and found that the economy versions had, on average, 21 per cent less tomato and 2 per cent extra sugar – but were 43 per cent cheaper than superior brands.

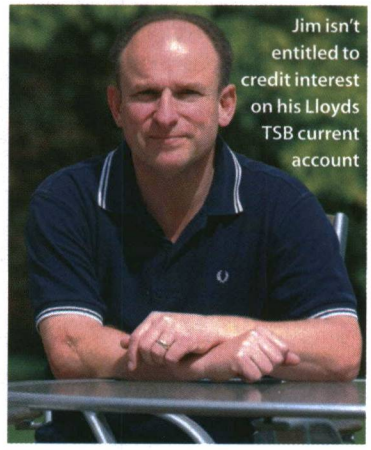
In February last year, our sister publication *Health Which?* found that, in many cases, economy brands didn't mean poorer nutrition (see 'Budget brands', p16). And in the magazine's taste test, which compared supermarkets' budget and standard versions of plain crisps, longlife orange juice, digestive biscuits, and low-fat strawberry yogurt, only the budget yogurts were voted clear losers.

The TSOs announced their findings as part of a drive to raise public awareness of trading standards services' work in policing food quality and labelling. They also revealed a dossier of recent food crimes which had led to successful prosecutions.

The list included children's lollipops that contained more than eight times the permitted level of colouring, ten cases of chicken with unlabelled added water, 'beef' steaklets containing mechanically recovered chicken, and products on sale past their use-by date.

Test shows economy fish fingers aren't short on fish

Lloyds TSB loophole leads to lost interest



Jim isn't entitled to credit interest on his Lloyds TSB current account

Lloyds TSB customer Jim Neal has discovered that he isn't entitled to the same improvements to his account as many of the bank's other customers, even though he's been a loyal customer for more than 30 years.

Lloyds TSB recently spruced up its current accounts with its heavily advertised 'Plus' offer of increased credit interest. Customers can get up to 3.2 per cent on credit balances, so long as they pay in a certain amount each month, and log on to internet banking at least six times a month.

Jim has a Lloyds TSB Platinum account. For £12 a month he receives benefits such as travel insurance. Alternatively, customers can keep £3,500 in the account and have the fee waived, which is what Jim does.

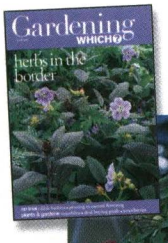
But Jim can't get interest and keep the fee waiver. If he upgrades, he'll have to pay the £12 a month, regardless of his balance. The interest wouldn't offset the extra cost.

Jim feels the adverts are misleading, as the terms of his account make it impossible for him to benefit. He's not alone. The rules apply to any customer with a Platinum or Gold account.

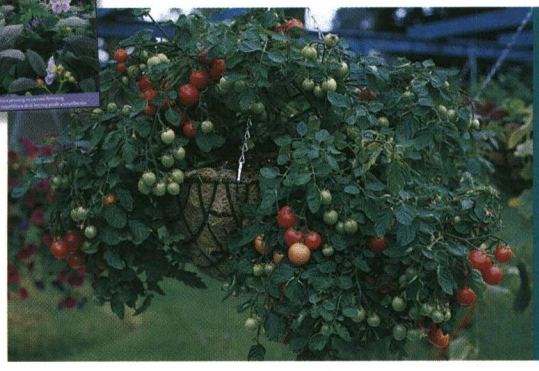
Lloyds TSB argues that customers who benefit from the fee waiver already get good value, which is why they don't qualify for credit interest.

We'd like to see Lloyds TSB offer better interest rates to all of its customers, regardless of their balance or how much they pay in.

PHOTOGRAPHY ANTONY BLAKE PICTURE LIBRARY; NORTH NEWS AND PICTURES



EDIBLE HANGING BASKETS



Tumbling tomatoes (left) and oregano (right) taste as good as they look. They're just two ideas for edible hanging baskets, featured in this month's *Gardening Which?*

Hanging baskets needn't be confined to summer bedding. You can buck the trend by filling them with veg and fruit, says a report in the June issue of *Gardening Which?*.

Last summer *Gardening Which?* tested a variety of edible plant combinations in baskets and concluded that, if you choose plants carefully, edible hanging baskets can look great – and also provide tasty, home-grown crops for many months to come.

For bean-lovers, the dwarf French bean 'Purple Teepee' came top, providing a crop of over 3kg from one basket. Its pink flowers and dark-purple pods are set off to advantage by lush, green foliage. For another attractive display, plant the dwarf aubergine 'Mohican' with the cut-and-come-again lettuce 'Cerize'. The aubergine has mauve flowers followed by white fruit, while the frilly-leafed lettuce looks pretty when planted around the edge.

Herbs, too, can look splendid in hanging baskets. Try drought-tolerant rosemary, thyme and purple basil for a Mediterranean feel that will look great all summer long.

Although carrots produce their crop underground, *Gardening Which?* says they can still be grown in a basket. The feathery leaves of the spherical carrot 'Parmex', combined with the brightly coloured stems of beetroot and chard, make a pleasing contrast. The chard and carrot gave a reasonable crop – but, cautions the report, don't expect too much from the beetroot.

You can prevent blackberry from rampaging through your borders by confining it to a basket. By placing another basket on top, you can quickly create the effect of a living sphere. And don't forget the more familiar basket plants like the tumbling tomato or strawberry.

As well as revealing the best plants for the job, *Gardening Which?* gives detailed information on how many plants you'll need, the best varieties to choose, and how soon you can expect a crop. It also gives advice on how to make your baskets as easy-to-care-for as possible.

Also in Gardening Which? this month

- Sheds – what to buy
- Water lilies
- Pruning to control flowering

ABSORBING NUTRIENTS

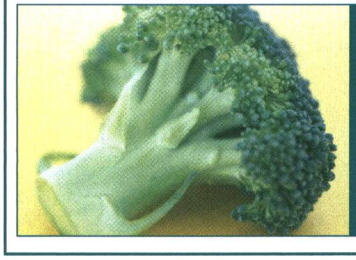
Fine-tuning what you eat, and when, can help you get the most from your food, says a *Health Which?* report, out this month. Just because a food is full of vitamins and minerals, it doesn't mean that all those nutrients will be absorbed by our bodies. And, while some nutrients are destroyed in the cooking and preparation processes, those same processes can actually increase our uptake of other nutrients. It's all due to 'bioavailability'.

Bioavailability (or biological availability) is the term used to describe the proportion of a nutrient in a food that's absorbed by your gut and available to be used by your body. But, says *Health Which?*, assessing bioavailability isn't straightforward. It depends on how easily a particular nutrient is released from different foods and supplements, what else you've eaten, how much of the nutrient is already in your body, and on how much of a nutrient your body needs at any one time.

Take calcium. This is very poorly absorbed from spinach. And, though absorption is excellent from broccoli, sprouts and cabbage, milk and dairy products are your best bet as they contain higher amounts.

Eating foods together may enhance or inhibit absorption. If you don't eat meat, for instance, you can maximise the amount of iron you absorb from your diet by having a small amount of a vitamin C-containing drink or food, such as juice, salad or fruit, with meals. And tea and coffee contain polyphenols, so drinking these with, or just after, a meal can reduce absorption.

Health Which? warns that medicines too can affect the bioavailability of nutrients. Some are absorbed at the same place ('binding site') in the gut, some bind certain minerals, while others, such as antacids, change the acidity of the stomach. So always read the information that comes with the medicine, or ask your GP.

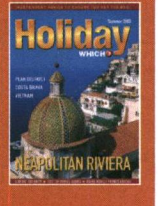


We absorb 50 per cent or more of the calcium in broccoli. *Health Which?* tells you how to get the most from your food

Also in Health Which? this month

- The real cost of mental illness
- Marketing drugs
- Exercise and depression

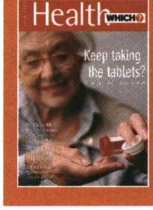
FREE TRIAL

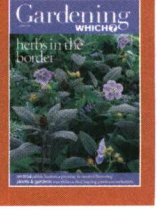


For a free trial to Health Which?, Gardening Which? or any of our magazines, just call

0800 252 100

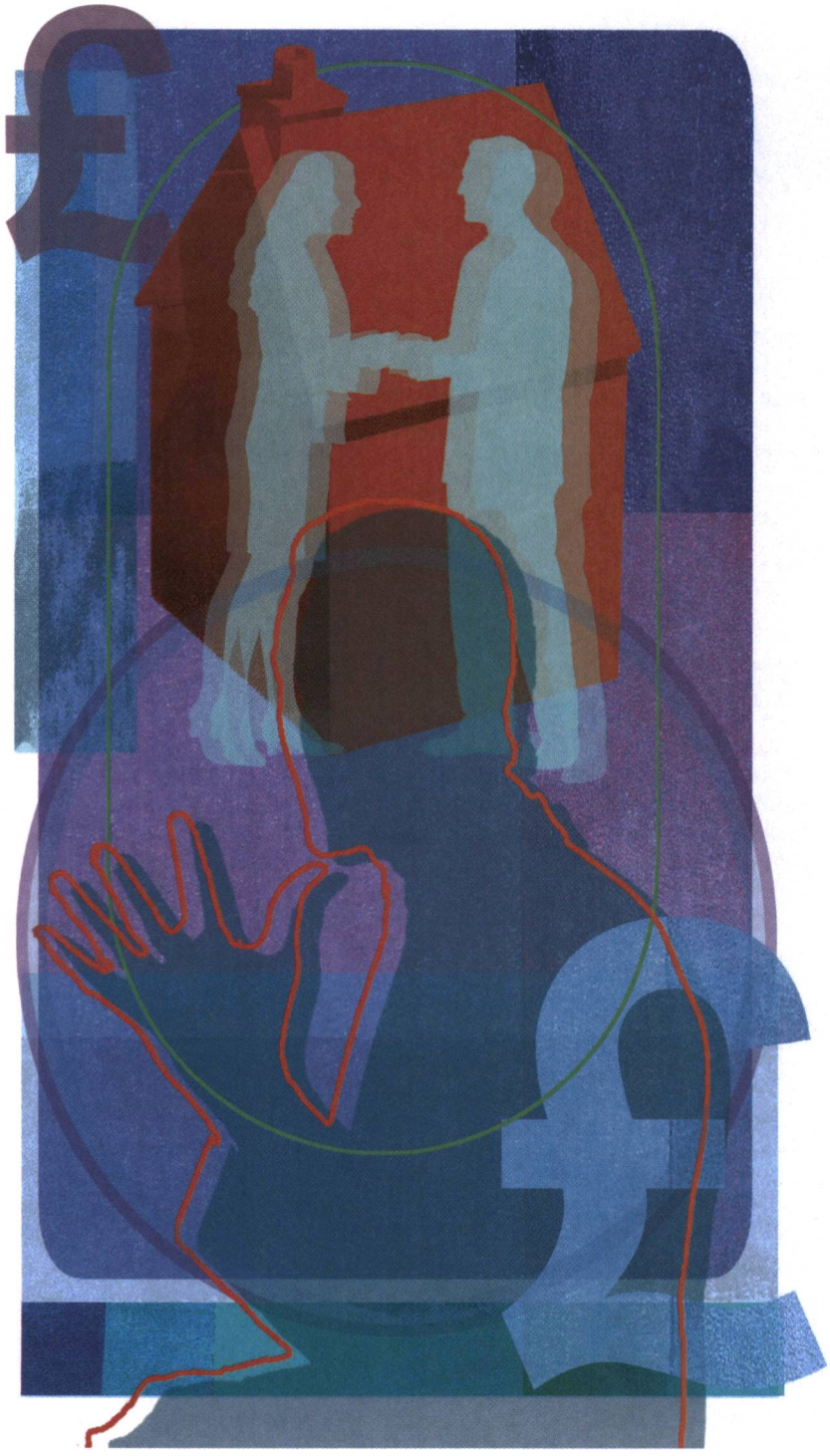
(payment details required for when your free trial ends)

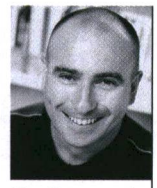




We go undercover to find estate agents using dodgy contracts and breaking the law. We've started taking action against the worst of them

The real estate agents





Pete Tynan, on the trail of the estate agents ripping off buyers and sellers

How do you know you can trust your estate agent? It's a question most of us try to put to the back of our minds when we're moving house. But if you're trying to buy your dream home and the estate agent tells you there are higher offers on the table, how can you be sure those offers really exist? Or, if you're selling your house, how can you tell whether the estate agent is passing on the highest offers and not just those from its friendly local property developer?

The short answer is, you can't. They could be doing you out of vast amounts of money without your ever realising. As things stand, there's little reassurance that an estate agent will do its job competently and honestly. Anyone can set up as an estate agent; they don't have to pass any exams or apply for a licence. In fact, they could walk out of prison with a fraud charge one day and start selling houses the next. And there's no one routinely checking what an estate agent is up to behind your back.

So we've gone undercover to cast some light on the parts of the house-buying process the public doesn't usually see. Estate agents don't have a glimmering reputation already and nobody would be shocked to discover that some of them are pretty hapless. But we found something more – estate agents using contracts with unfair small print and even some who were prepared to break the law.

The findings from our investigation apply only to England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The law surrounding estate agency is different in Scotland.

AGENTS PROVOCATEURS

In March, we asked ten home owners in England to put their properties on the market. Each requested valuations from three estate agents and asked for copies of their contracts. The contracts were packed off to our legal experts, and the would-be sellers each chose an agent for their home.

Then our researchers posed as potential buyers for the properties. This way, we found out what the agents were saying to both our sellers and our buyers – so we knew whether they were being straight with all concerned. We were able to successfully place offers on six of the ten properties.

Industry experts reckon that some agents can make more from commission on mortgage advice and insurance than from commission on house sales. So we

PHOTOGRAPHY RICHARD MAILE, MICHAEL SULLIVAN, JOHN TRENHOLM ILLUSTRATION SARAH JONES

wondered – would any of the estate agents be tempted to pass on only bids from buyers who were also prepared to take out a mortgage through them? To find out, our first researcher put in a low offer but agreed to arrange their finances through the estate agent. A second researcher put in a higher offer but declined any offers of financial advice.

CRIMES OF ESTATE

Even in our snapshot test, we found one agent which seriously violated the law, seemingly to make more money for itself. It lied to one of our buyers by saying that a higher offer had already been rejected and encouraged them to come back with another offer – the higher offer was a complete fabrication.

It also fell straight into our finance trap. It passed on details of the lower offer on the house, from the buyer who had opted for its mortgage advice. However, it conveniently forgot about the higher offer, potentially leaving our vendor several thousand pounds worse off.

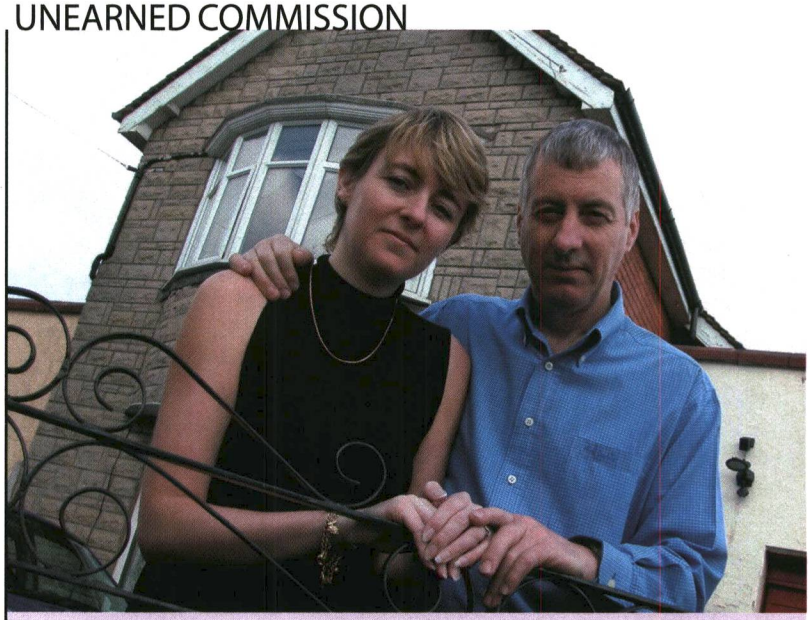
This estate agent was breaking the law. But if an agent decided to play either of these tricks on you, you'd have no way of knowing. And this isn't an isolated case – several people have told us about agents who've come straight out and said they won't pass on buyers' offers unless the client uses their mortgage services.

Less serious breaches of the law were rife. Agents are supposed to pass on all offers promptly in writing. Unfortunately, only two of the six agents which received offers managed this. The others passed on information only over the phone, and several were less than prompt in telling their clients what was going on.

CONTRACT KILLERS

Meanwhile, back at *Which?*, our lawyers were poring over the contracts. And they were concerned by what they saw. Some contracts were needlessly complicated,

UNEARNED COMMISSION



If you sell your house yourself, make sure the estate agent doesn't take credit for it

Angela Hill and John McLeod face legal action from Halifax estate agents, which claims it sold their flat in Grantham.

They had a sole-agency agreement with Halifax and it arranged several viewings. Unfortunately, none of these resulted in a sale. Then, luckily, a neighbour introduced them to a potential buyer. The buyer turned out to be keen and the sole-agency agreement allowed Angela and John to sell to their private buyer without the agent getting a cut of the sale. The couple say that they informed Halifax that they'd found a buyer and, during this conversation, the agent asked for the buyer's details. John and Angela assumed this was just for its records. But their luck had run out. Halifax used the information to claim commission on the sale and is suing the couple for its fee and costs – more than £800.

Halifax says that if the couple had wanted to sell privately, they should have cancelled the contract, and that it played an active role in the sale. We think Halifax has no right to its sole-agency fee and we're supporting John and Angela's case.

MISLEADING ADVERTISING

If an estate agent claims it's a member of a trade body, it's worth double-checking

When Judith Barkley's mother inherited the bungalow next to her home, she wanted to sell it through an agent she could trust. So she plumped for Chris Campbell & Co of Bexhill, partly because it was advertised as a member of the National Association of Estate Agents (NAEA). She told it she'd consider a lower offer from someone she'd like as a neighbour, such as an elderly lady.

Shortly after, an offer was placed at £158,000, £7,000 below the agency's recommended asking price. Supposedly, the property was for the purchaser's mother and Judith's mother accepted the offer. However, nobody moved in and, a few months later, the new owner, a property developer, sold the bungalow for £187,950.

Judith suspected that the agent had undervalued the bungalow and misled her mother about the buyer. She contacted the NAEA for advice – but it told her that her estate agent was not, in fact, a member, so it couldn't help. Chris Campbell & Co admits its Bexhill office isn't an NAEA member – though it still carries the logo in its adverts, several months after Judith's complaint. It says it was misled by the buyer about his intentions.

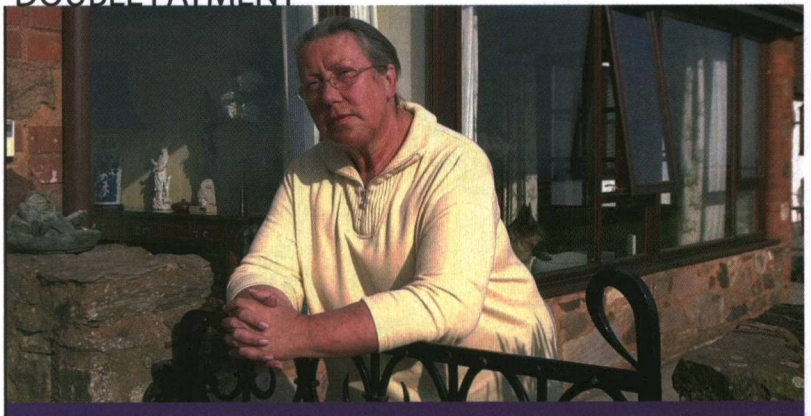
HIDDEN OFFERS

Is your estate agent making a few property development deals on the side?

In 1999, Stuart Monkcom and his brother, David, put their late parents' home on the market. They used Bradford & Bingley Morris Dibben of Winchester.

Disappointingly, they received only two offers, both well below the £150,000 asking price. So when a prospective purchaser called about an offer which hadn't been passed on by the estate agent, they became suspicious. They suspected that the estate agent was colluding with property developers, and passing on only their offers. So the brothers asked their solicitor to lodge a formal complaint with Bradford & Bingley's head office. It dismissed the local manager. Stuart and David received a formal apology and £500 to cover their legal costs and inconvenience.

DOUBLE PAYMENT



Switching estate agents isn't always simple – you could end up paying commission twice over

In September 2000, Alannah Hunt's house was valued at £1,150,000 by Winkworth and at about £900,000 by FPD Savills. She initially signed with Winkworth but, when only one offer came in, she decided to give notice and switch to Savills instead.

Soon after, she accepted an offer of £875,000, paid Savills its £20,000 fee and started to think about life in her new home in the countryside. But, then, about five months later, Winkworth asked for almost £18,000 in fees. It claimed it had introduced the buyer so it was contractually entitled to its fee. That was the first Alannah had heard about Winkworth having anything to do with the person who had bought her house – she'd trusted that Savills had found a new buyer. But, in fact, he had already seen the house with Winkworth and his details were on a list provided to Savills of people who had viewed the house. Savills had failed to tell Alannah. In the end, she paid a total of almost £38,000 in commission.

some misleading, and some downright unfair. When we say a contract is unfair, we mean the estate agent's client has agreed to terms which damage their rights so much they should never have been included in the contract. In the worst cases, unfair contracts can leave you paying out thousands of pounds even if an agent has done nothing to help your sale.

We're so concerned by some of the examples we found that we've already started taking action against the unfair contract terms of Felicity J Lord (Hackney), Foxstons (Leicester), Haart (Streatham), Stonehouse Estates (London) and Whitegates (Leeds).

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The worrying thing here is that there's no systematic way to prevent the types of unfair contract and breaches of the law that we've come across. The main piece of legislation governing estate agency is the Estate Agents Act 1979, which sets out how estate agents are supposed to behave. For example, they can't make up offers on a property to wring a higher price out of a buyer. But the Act obviously isn't working – most estate agents we looked at weren't even following the basic provisions of the law. The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) is responsible for enforcing the laws for estate agents, but how can it enforce the law when no one sees it being broken?

That's the question the OFT must answer when, in a few weeks, it concludes its year-long study of the estate agency industry. To us, the answer's simple – it should call time on voluntary regulation, set up a licensing scheme, and put measures in place to make breaches of the law less likely. If this is to work, the OFT must include three key elements.

First, we need to know what they're up to. Every estate agent should be subject to unannounced checks of their records. Second, people should be guaranteed access to a body with the power to settle disputes. At present, there is an ombudsman scheme but it's voluntary so, unsurprisingly, only a third of estate agents are signed up to it. Third, there should be mandatory training for all estate agents – as things stand, you can set up as an estate agent without any formal qualifications.

The Estate Agents Act also defines the legal meanings of basic terms used in contracts. Here, again, the law seems all well and good until you look at what's actually happening. Legally, agents must use clear contract terms. In reality, many contracts are badly worded and some seem designed to mislead

CAN WE HELP YOU TO GET EVEN?

Our findings show that some estate agents are taking consumers for a ride. We've already started taking action against the worst offenders in our investigation but we're not going to let it go at that. We need your help to find the estate agents which aren't playing by the rules. So, if you've suffered from a confusing contract, been forced to pay commission when you don't think it's due, or come across any estate agents playing other dirty tricks, get in touch. Visit our website, **www.which.co.uk/campaigns/hometruths**, for more details. You can email us at **home_truths@which.co.uk**, or write to us at **Dept EH, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH**.

PHOTOGRAPHY APEX NEWS, TERRY MEALEY, JOE SHEEHAN

people. It's not clear whether the legal definitions in the act are actually helping house buyers and sellers. We think the way to solve the uncertainty is a standard contract, used across the industry, which covers things such as fees, selling rights and tie-in periods.

The challenge now facing the government isn't an easy one. But the basics of it are as simple as qualifying to be an estate agent: it's a no-brainer. As things stand, incompetence and unchecked greed is costing people a massive amount of money, sometimes without their ever realising. The only way to stop it is by properly regulating the industry. Watch this space for our reaction to the OFT's report, and to see how we get along with our action against unfair contracts and further investigations into estate agents' dirty tricks.

FURTHER INFORMATION

www.oft.gov.uk/consumer/your+rights+when+shopping/estate+agent The Office of Fair Trading's advice site

www.oea.co.uk/c_guide.htm The Ombudsman for Estate Agents' site. Includes information on making a complaint

BROKEN PROMISES

The bargaining's over, the sale's agreed and you can sit back and relax at last – or can you?

Peter and Ann Hotchkiss were delighted when their offer of £165,000 was accepted on a bungalow in Welford-on-Avon in April 2001. But, three months later, the couple were dismayed to see the house readvertised. The estate agent, Organ Dainton, claims the bungalow's owner had lost faith in the sale of Peter and Ann's house, and wanted the bungalow back on the market. It says it phoned the couple to tell them. However, they deny this and say the first they knew about the new advert was when they saw it in the paper.

They complained to the National Association of Estate Agents. It cautioned Stephen Organ but won't tell us the official reason. However, its code of conduct says agents must tell buyers in writing if they readvertise after an offer has been accepted.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SIGN

There are plenty of contractual terms which can catch you out. Here's our guide to the main ones.

SELLING RIGHTS

Be absolutely clear about the arrangement you're entering – sole selling, sole agency or multi agency. These terms have particular meanings in law. For example, a 'sole-agency' agreement will let you sell the property to a buyer you find yourself, without paying the agent's commission. Under a 'sole-selling-rights' agreement, they'd still get their money.

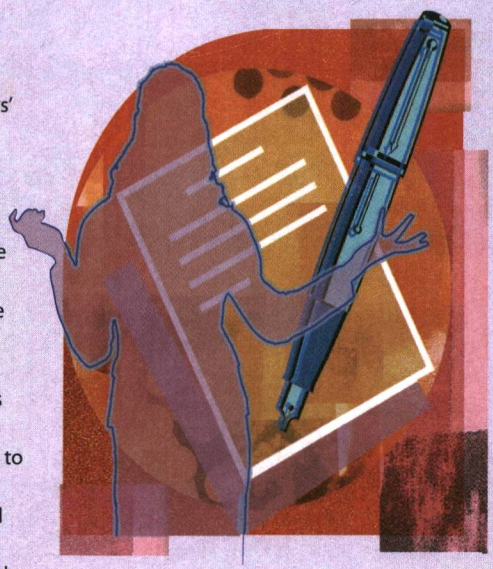
Unfortunately, not all the estate agents we visited had been boning up on their legalese. We came across some, such as Foxstons in Leicester, which use 'sole selling rights' and 'sole agency' interchangeably, so it's difficult to decide what the contracts mean. Worse still, we found three agents – Felicity J Lord (Hackney), Haart (Streatham) and Stonehouse Estates (London) – which use sole-agency agreements with hidden sole-selling-rights clauses.

And we came across another little trick used to confuse the issue. Whitegates' (Leeds) sole-agency contract says that, if you're approached directly by a potential buyer, you should refer them to the agents. So, even though you signed a sole-agency contract, it's still difficult to avoid paying commission to the agents if you sell.

If you find a contract confusing, don't sign it – whether it's deliberately misleading or just plain dozy, you're better off with a different agent.

READY, WILLING AND ABLE PURCHASER

If you see this term in a contract, don't sign. Imagine the agent has found you a buyer who's offered the asking price. Then, after you accept, your situation changes – say, you lose your job – and you can't proceed with the sale. If the agent's contract had a 'ready, willing and able purchaser' clause, it can still demand its commission.



PAYMENT

Choose an agent which gives you a few days for the money to transfer before it charges interest. And make sure it requires payment when the sale is completed rather than when contracts are exchanged. Not all sales make it to completion and, in any case, it could be a few weeks after exchange before the sale is completed and you have the proceeds from the sale. Contracts which demand payment on exchange could leave you with a bill of several thousand pounds before you've received a penny – and some will charge interest for late payment.

Also, never hand over the authority to pay the estate agent to anyone else. We found a clause in some contracts, such as those from Hadley Estates in Brighton, which demand that vendors give irrevocable authority to their solicitors to pay the agents. This puts you in a weak position if you have a complaint about the service provided – you won't have the power to withhold payment.

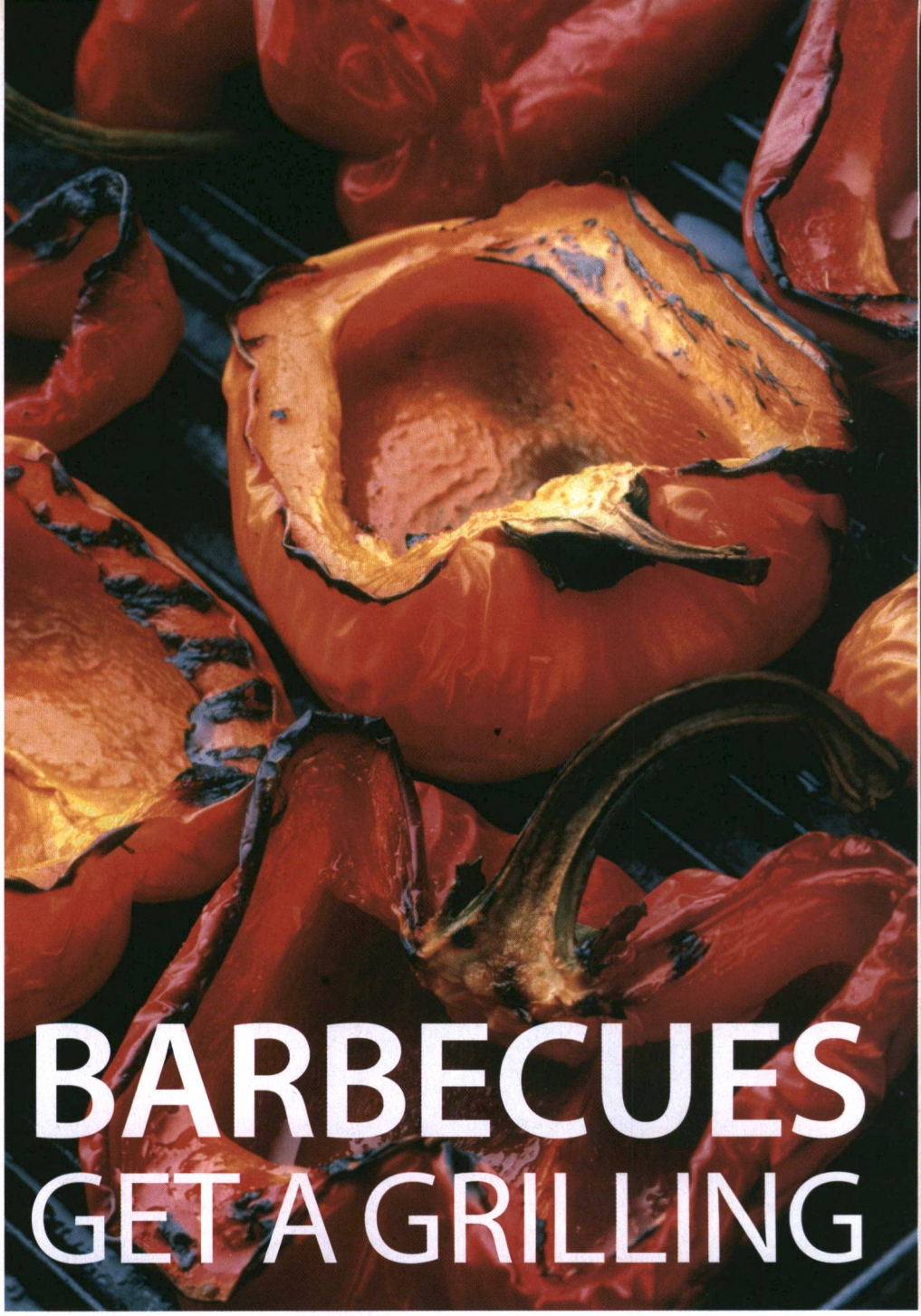
TIE-IN PERIODS

Always avoid lengthy tie-in periods – say, eight weeks or more. And remember to factor in the notice period, which is often two weeks – you can't usually give notice until the minimum contract period is over. For example, WH Brown in Yorkshire (part of the Sequence group) asked us for a 16-week sole-agency agreement with 14 days' written notice. In total, this would tie you to the one agent for more than four months.

Happily, some agents' contracts had no tie-in periods, just notice periods – such as Hunters Estate Agents (Leeds) and Halifax (Rotherham). So make sure you shop around for reasonable terms.

OPEN-ENDED AGREEMENTS

Check what happens when the contract ends. Some agents operate a 'six-month rule' – you still have to pay them if a buyer they introduced buys your home within six months of a contract ending. But many go further than this. Some, such as Felicity J Lord and Foxstons, suggest this is an open-ended agreement – no matter how much time passes, they'll still want their fee.



BARBECUES GET A GRILLING

Does spending a bit more get you a better barbecue? And what do accessories, such as side burners and griddles, add to the barbecuing experience?

Weather-permitting, the barbecue season is approaching, and department stores and garden centres are full of luxury gas barbecues and expensive versions of the traditional kettle barbecue.

We've tested 11 gas and six charcoal barbecues priced from £80 to £600 to help you decide whether you want to pay more for extra features.

WHAT TYPE TO CHOOSE

Obviously, the barbecue you choose to buy will depend on how many people you want to cater for, what you'll cook, where you'll store it, and how much you want to spend. Most of the barbecues that we've tested come in other sizes, some with added cooking functions.

GAS OR CHARCOAL?

The answer to this question is probably as much down to personal choice as it is the merits of the different fuels. For some people, getting their hands dirty and mastering the foibles of an individual charcoal grill is as much part of the fun as eating the food. All the charcoal grills we've tested have features that claim to make barbecuing easier, cleaner or more versatile. But cooking with charcoal remains an art. You're limited to adjusting the air vents, or moving the position of the grill over the coals to control the temperature, and you'll have to add more charcoal if you want the heat to last a long time.

For other people, the speed and convenience of cooking with gas outweighs any lack of authenticity. Gas barbecues are ready to grill in the time it takes to slip into a pair of shorts, and it's easy to control the temperature, too.

One downside of gas barbecues is that they can be complicated to assemble for the first time you use them. In our tests the average assembly time for the gas models was one hour 20 minutes, almost twice that of the charcoal ones. We think it might be tricky for people who find it hard to follow working diagrams to assemble some models – especially ones that require the gas burners, controls and igniter systems to be fitted. In some cases, most of the gas connections between the controls, burners and the gas hose are pre-made, but unfortunately with some models you'll need to do this yourself.

You'll also need to connect a gas barbecue to a portable gas cylinder. In some cases, you might have to fit a regulator to the gas hose before you can connect it to the cylinder – a job that should take about five minutes. Ask to see the instructions before you buy to get an idea of what you're taking on. If you don't feel confident that you can make the connections yourself, ask an expert, such as a Corgi-registered gas fitter, to show you how to do it. Always disconnect the barbecue from the gas bottle when it's not in use, too.

USEFUL FEATURES

The models we tested have a wide range of cooking features and accessories, some of which are detailed below. We checked how easy these are to use (see 'How we tested', opposite) and asked 17 keen barbecuers to try cooking with four of the barbecues each. They then told us what the features added to the overall cooking experience.

Grills All of the barbecues have a cast iron or wire grill. Cast iron grills are more robust but can be heavy to remove for cleaning. A raised edge or lip around the grill makes it easier to turn food, because you can push the food up against it to help grip it firmly. Some charcoal grills have

PHOTOGRAPHY ANTHONY BLAKE PHOTO LIBRARY, GETTYONE STONE

Gas or charcoal? It's down to personal taste

We found gas barbecues were more convenient

Gas models take longer to assemble

flaps for adding more charcoal, but use gloves to open them because the handles can get very hot.

Cooking hoods Most of the barbecues we tested came with a hood that you close to roast or smoke food using indirect heat. Our users preferred barbecues with hinged hoods. They also thought that viewing windows were a good idea, but said they got mucky rapidly and weren't that easy to clean. Handles on the side of the hood mean that you don't have to lean over the hot grill to lift it.

A temperature indicator fitted to the hood is useful for checking the cooking temperature when the lid is closed. Some indicators are removable and have a probe that can be stuck into food to check its temperature. The indicators can get hot if the hood has been closed for a long time, so take care when removing one.

Griddles and hotplates Some gas models have a cast iron griddle that can be used for cooking delicate food that would ordinarily fall through the grill. Our users thought these were a good idea but didn't like the way that the fat from meat pooled on them, because it could cause a dangerous fat fire.

Warming racks These keep cooked food warm, away from the main grill, but sometimes our users found that they needed long tongs to use them safely because they had to reach over the grill to get to them.

Side burners Some gas barbecues have small burners at the side, which can be used to whip up a sauce or stir-fry. They are convenient, but our users were worried that pans could easily be knocked off them.

Shelves Some models have side, front or base shelves. Although generally helpful, some of the shelves in the base made it harder to move the barbecues around.

Radiants, flavourisers and drip trays With gas barbecues, the cooking heat comes from the gas flames, but these don't heat the whole area under the grill. To make sure that the grill is heated evenly, some gas barbecues have lava rock or ceramic briquette radiants above the burners, which absorb the heat coming from the gas and radiate it to the food.

Charcoal vaporises fat as it drips off food, but gas barbecues need some way to draw and collect fat. Some barbecues include metal bars between the gas and grill, called flavourisers, which vaporise the fat, adding to the flavour of the food. Lava rock and briquettes also do this to a lesser extent. Others have a tray beneath the burners to collect the fat, or a hole that drains it away to an external pot. None of the flavourisers or drip trays was particularly hard to clean.

HOW WE TESTED

We've thoroughly tested the barbecues, from putting them together for the first time, to checking for signs of damage after use. Gas models were more durable and convenient to use, so they got higher total test scores. Ease of cleaning was key, too, because if you have to spend ages cleaning your barbecue, it's a lot less fun to use.

We looked at the time it took to assemble each model, noting whether any problems were caused by complexity, bad instructions, or poor manufacturing. We also trundled the barbecues around a 50-metre obstacle course, to see how easily they can be moved.

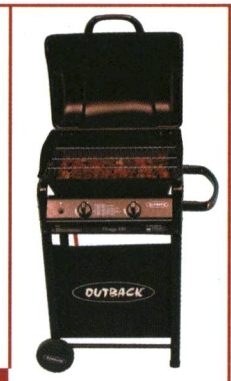
We assessed how easy it was to move and use the components such as grills, vents and roasting lids, and whether the controls were easy to see and use. We also checked how easy it was to set up each barbecue for grilling and, if relevant, roasting and using special features like warming racks and griddles.

We did safety checks to see whether surfaces became too hot, or gas connections leaked, and how easy it was to knock over each barbecue. None raised major safety concerns, but each was given an overall safety rating based on minor safety concerns.

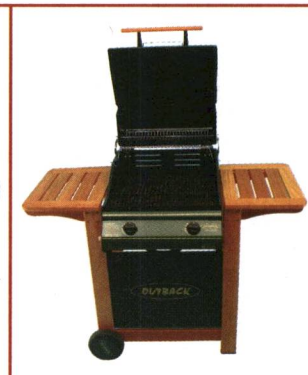
BEST BUYS

If you're thinking about treating yourself to a new barbecue this summer, these Best Buys should give you years of barbecuing pleasure. You can find your nearest stockist by calling the companies direct. We have listed their contact details on p58. Prices shown here are the manufacturers' guide prices, so the prices you see in the shops may vary. All our Best Buys have high total test scores, were easy to assemble, and are good value for money.

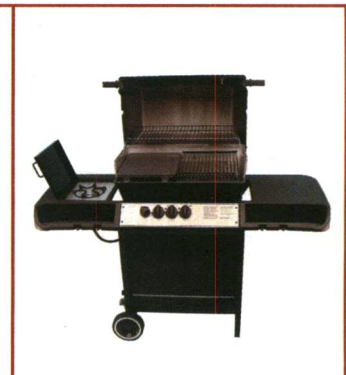
European Outdoor Chef cc 480 Classic Charcoal



Outback Omega 100



Outback Trooper



Sterling 2564-3GBC

CHARCOAL

Despite the unusual array of cooking features and styles offered by the charcoal barbecues in this test, our Best Buy is a conventional kettle barbecue, the **European Outdoor Chef cc 480 Classic Charcoal, £150.** It is the second cheapest in our batch, but received the highest test score – mainly because it heated up faster and was more convenient to use than the other charcoal models we tested. It was also the quickest barbecue to assemble, taking only 15 minutes.

GAS

Several of the gas barbecues did very well, so which one you buy is largely a question of how much you're prepared to pay for the features you fancy.

At **£80** the **Outback Omega 100** offers good value for money if you want a simple gas barbecue that's easy to put together and doesn't take up much space. The **Outback Trooper, £250,** is also a good choice for people who specifically want a large grill area.

If you'd prefer to cook on more than just a grill, the **Sterling 2564-3GBC, £300,** is well worth considering – with its griddle, side burner and warming rack, it offers the flexibility to cook an entire meal.

The European Outdoor Chef Barcelona Classic Kettle 570, £400, and the Weber Genesis Silver B, £600, are both good barbecues, but neither scored sufficiently more than our Best Buys to justify their higher cost.

CHARCOAL BARBECUES

EUROPEAN OUTDOOR CHEF
cc 480 Classic Charcoal £150

This 48cm kettle barbecue has a medium-sized, round wire grill and a central half-funnel for catching fat drips and channelling them down to a drip tray. It was quick and simple to assemble, and the fastest charcoal barbecue to reach cooking temperature. You don't need to set it up specially for roasting, because the cooking funnel sits between the charcoal and the grill, shielding the food from the charcoal for indirect cooking. But it took a while to get to roasting temperature. We also found that the drip tray must be filled with water at all times to avoid large flare-ups from the collected fat.

The cooking hood has a useful hook for hanging it on the body and a removable temperature sensor that can be used to check the food. It was easy to add more fuel through the grill, but the handle for doing this got hot. As with most kettle barbecues, be careful not to burn yourself on the hot drum.

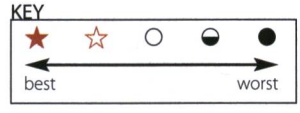
It was tricky to transport, partly because it had a tendency to tip if the front was lifted too high, and the low shelf caught as we tried to lift it into the shed.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 15
Ease of cleaning the grill ○
Overall safety ☆
TOTAL TEST SCORE 67%

TOTAL TEST SCORE

This ignores price and is based on:	
Cleaning	30%
Convenience	25%
Safety assessment	20%
Stability	15%
Durability	10%

KEY



NIPOORI
Tandoori £130

Not only a barbecue, this is a tandoori oven, too. As a barbecue it provided the least grilling space of any in the test. The grill can be set at five heights but it was difficult to adjust when it had food on it, and it was tricky to turn food on the grill.

The barbecue is converted into a tandoori oven by placing the tandoori hood over the base when it contains lit coals. Food is cooked on skewers lowered vertically into the oven. Our users found it difficult to cook food evenly in the tandoori – food was charred at the bottom of the skewer before it was cooked at the top.

Assembling it was easy, and it was small and light enough to be carried easily.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 25
Ease of cleaning the grill ☆
Overall safety ☆
TOTAL TEST SCORE 62%

BARBECOOK Ellips Stainless Steel £220

This stainless steel barbecue can be used only for grilling. It has a unique system for igniting the charcoal – you light newspapers in the bottom, which fly up the supporting column and ignite the coals. It's a good idea, but unreliable – only one of our three attempts to light it this way were successful. The medium-sized rectangular wire grill needs to be lifted out to add more charcoal – this could cause problems because the grill handles got hot. The controls are quite low, so you may have to crouch to use them.

Although it achieved among the highest marks for ease of use, safety and durability of the charcoal grills, it was the least liked by all four users who tried it.

It was quick and easy to assemble, but there is a risk of it tipping over when you move it.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 25
Ease of cleaning the grill ○
Overall safety ☆
TOTAL TEST SCORE 62%

ROTAL
Barby Gourmet £300

This distinctive barbecue has two triangular wire grills, fixed at different heights that can be moved across the coals or drip tray independently from each other. You can swing the grills away from the heat to turn the food over, and move food from the higher or lower grills to regulate how quickly it cooks. The lid can be inverted and used as a griddle. It provided the largest amount of grilling space of any barbecue in this test and could cook more than any of the other charcoal grills at one time.

Its unusual design made it harder to clean, first because there were two separate grills, but also because the drip tray needed to be unscrewed for cleaning.

It took a while to assemble, partly because the instructions were hard to follow. It's also wide and heavy, which made it difficult to manoeuvre for storage.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 25
Ease of cleaning the grill ◒
Overall safety ☆
TOTAL TEST SCORE 60%

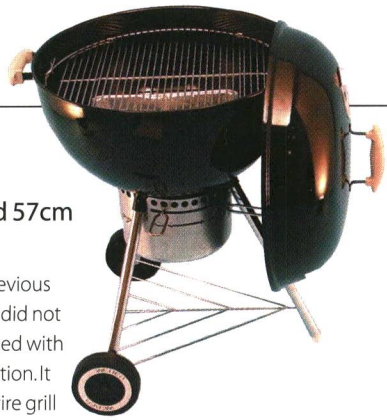
BRINKMAN Smoke 'n' Pit Pitmaster £180

Grilling, roasting and smoking are all possible with this barbecue. The large wire grill can be set at three different heights, but it's difficult to adjust once the coals are lit. It was also harder to clean the ash out compared with other charcoal barbecues on test.

This was the largest and most troublesome charcoal barbecue to assemble, requiring two people to bolt it together. More positively, its size and weight made it stable, but its small, wobbly wheels and unhelpfully positioned handle also made it tricky to move.

The metal side vent became extremely hot while the barbecue was being used and could let hot coals fall out.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 25
Ease of cleaning the grill ○
Overall safety ○
TOTAL TEST SCORE 55%



WEBER
One-Touch Gold 57cm
£160

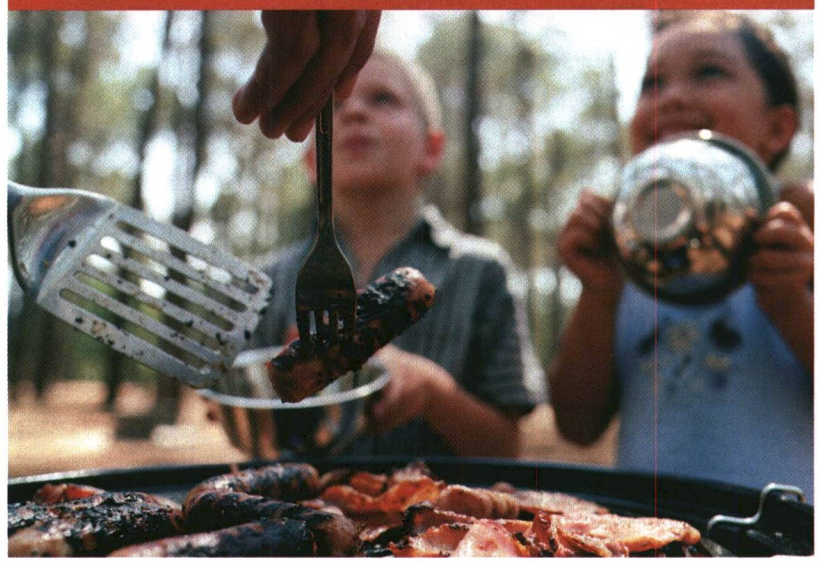
A big brother to a previous *Which?* Best Buy, this did not fare so well when faced with more costly competition. It has a large, circular wire grill with flaps on either side that make it easier to add extra charcoal. It can be set up to grill or roast, but you have to decide which before you start cooking. It is quite a low barbecue, so taller people will have to stoop to use it, and, like several others, it's tricky to prevent it from tipping when you move it.

It was quick and easy to assemble, but fitting the ash pan and ash pan holder were fiddly.

Like the other kettle barbecues, you have to be careful to avoid touching the hot drum, especially when using the vent controls. The top lid vent got extremely hot, too.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 25
Ease of cleaning the grill ○
Overall safety ○
TOTAL TEST SCORE 51%

WIN We've got ten Best Buy Outback Trooper gas barbecues to give away in our easy-to-enter competition. For details, see p3 or visit www.which.co.uk/whichextra/content/main/comp.shtml



GAS BARBECUES

BEST BUY OUTBACK Trooper £250

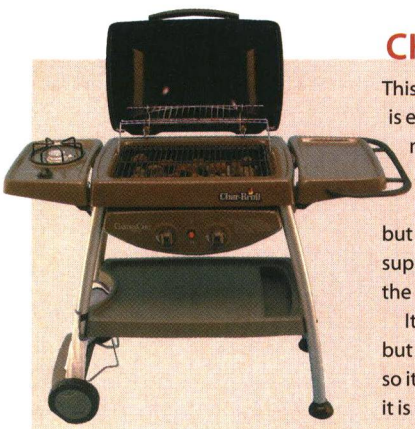
This simple gas barbecue has a large, porcelain-coated cast iron grill and a warming rack. It has two gas burners and lava rock radiants, which need to be arranged carefully to avoid creating a cool spot in the middle of the grill. You can fit a rotisserie, but you have to buy it separately for about £40.

This barbecue had lots of merits. The gas ignites automatically when the controls are switched on, and the markings on the controls are easy to see while barbecuing. You can use it to roast, but you might need to remove the warming rack for large joints.

It was simple to put together, but best done by two people. We found that the low shelf could catch as we moved the barbecue around.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 5
Ease of cleaning the grill ○
Overall safety ★
TOTAL TEST SCORE 80%

CHAR-BROIL Garden Chef Premium £130



This two-burner barbecue is exclusive to B&Q. It has a medium-sized porcelain-coated wire grill, side burner and warming rack, but the amount of lava rock supplied was insufficient for the size of the grill.

It can be used for roasting, but has no temperature gauge so it's difficult to judge how hot it is internally. The gas controls can't easily be read while you're standing at the barbecue.

It took time and effort to assemble and felt flimsy when it was moved as the handle is attached to a folding shelf.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 5
Ease of cleaning the grill ☆
Overall safety ☆
TOTAL TEST SCORE 73%

WEBER Genesis Silver B £600

This barbecue is big enough for you to cook for a crowd. It has three gas burners, a flavouriser bar and a large porcelain-enamelled cast iron grill. It provided the biggest grilling area of the gas barbecues and also has two warming racks, although the second needs to be emptied with tongs because you have to reach over the grill to get to it. To roast food, you just turn off the middle burner. The hood has a temperature sensor that can be removed and used to test the food.

The gas grill came ready-assembled, and the well laid out instructions included a section on using the barbecue safely.

It is big and heavy, but the wheels at the front and back made it easy to transport.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 5
Ease of cleaning the grill ○
Overall safety ★
TOTAL TEST SCORE 80%

▷

BEST BUY OUTBACK Omega 100 £80

At only half the size of most of the other gas barbecues, this simple model has a medium-sized wire grill with lava rocks underneath. Although it was easy to see the control settings from the cooking position, some gas level markings were hidden by the knobs. The only problem we found when we used it for roasting was it didn't have a temperature sensor.

Compared with other gas models, it was quick to assemble, but we had to buy a gas regulator and fit it separately. The instructions were well laid out, so it was easy to fit together.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 5
Ease of cleaning the grill ☆
Overall safety ☆
TOTAL TEST SCORE 73%

CAMPINGAZ Virtuoso 2000R Deluxe £190

This model has two gas burners, a large wire grill, side burner and a warming rack that you might need to remove for roasting large joints. The hood includes a viewing window and temperature indicator.

We found the grill bars were widely spaced so food fell through, and it wasn't easy to see the gas controls from the cooking position.

It took time to assemble as we had to fit the gas burner assembly and controls and make some of the gas connections between them – the parts to connect it to a gas cylinder weren't supplied.

The handle wasn't suitable for moving it around and the low shelf caught as we put it in the shed.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 5
Ease of cleaning the grill ☆
Overall safety ○
TOTAL TEST SCORE 68%

BEST BUY STERLING 2564-3GBC £300

This barbecue comes with many features including triple gas burners, a large, porcelain-coated cast iron grill that can be set at two different heights, a small griddle, a side burner and a warming rack. You can also buy a separate spit, and it has a flavourising system to vaporise the fat.

It was easy to use for roasting and reached temperature quickly. It was let down by the warming rack because the gap around the edge was a bit too big so food could fall through, and it got in the way when the users tried turning food at the back of the griddle. The gas igniter was easy to use, but the control knobs slightly obscured the limited markings.

It took a long time to assemble because there were several components, but since our test this model has been altered. Most parts are now ready built which should make it simpler to put together. We also found that there was nowhere comfortable to hold it for moving it around.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 5
Ease of cleaning the grill ○
Overall safety ★
TOTAL TEST SCORE 79%

EUROPEAN OUTDOOR CHEF Barcelona Classic Kettle 570 £400

A three-piece gourmet set of trivet, pizza plate and universal pan came with this impressive kettle barbecue. It has one gas burner, a large circular wire grill and a cone-shaped metal insert that lets you set it up differently, depending on what you want to cook. It was easy to use for roasting.

It has a removable heat sensor that can tell you the temperature inside the barbecue, or can be used to check food is hot. But the sensor itself became hot.

It was the quickest gas model to assemble, but we had to make the regulator connection.

Minutes to reach cooking temperature 5
Ease of cleaning the grill ○
Overall safety ☆
TOTAL TEST SCORE 80%

ALSO TESTED

Imperial Emerald 3 £300, £190 without lid
This has a medium-sized cast iron grill and griddle. It was more difficult to set up for roasting because the grill plates need rearranging.

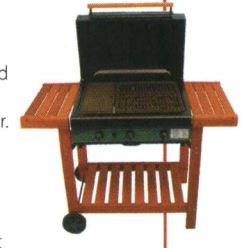
Poor quality instructions and some awkward fittings made assembling it longer and harder than expected, especially as it required a specialist tool to make the gas hose connections.
TOTAL TEST SCORE 77%

Australian Barbecue Company Triple Burner £350
This has a medium-sized cast iron grill and griddle with flat and ridged surfaces. It's easy to set up for roasting because you just turn off the burner below the joint and you're ready to go.

It took time to assemble, partly because the legs were difficult to fit and a gas regulator wasn't provided. The lid latch was difficult to operate from the front, and could get hot during cooking.
TOTAL TEST SCORE 73%

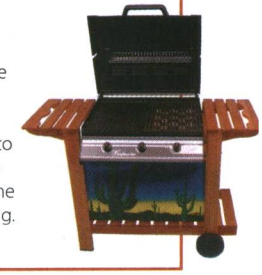
Sunshine Heritage 3 £300
This has a medium-sized cast iron grill and small, flat griddle. It was hard to use for roasting because some parts had to be repositioned, and it was slow to reach roasting temperature. Since our tests an improved roasting lid with a warming rack has been added. The controls were a little unclear and hard to see from the cooking position.

Some gas connections had to be made, and it required two people to bolt it together.
TOTAL TEST SCORE 72%

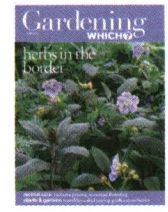


Beefmaster Triple Burner Roaster £250
This has a medium-sized, cast iron grill, a griddle and warming rack. It was easy to set up to roast by turning off the burner beneath the food.

Despite the clear instructions, it took a long time to assemble, and some gas connections had to be made. The lid lock mechanism was awkward to operate from the front, was easily damaged and became hot after prolonged cooking.
TOTAL TEST SCORE 74%



GARDENING WHICH?



To make your barbecue special, you could grow 'edible' hanging baskets. This month's *Gardening Which?* reports on how you can plant several varieties of herbs and vegetables in hanging baskets, which you can pick and put straight on the barbecue.

See this month's 'Inside Which?', p9, for more details.

To get three free issues call **0800 920 106** quoting **G6EB03**, or visit **www.gwfreetrial.co.uk**. Payment details will be needed for when your trial ends.

HAVE A SAFE LANDING

How to pick the shoes to help make your running comfortable and injury-free

Choosing the right running shoes isn't just about finding a colour and style you like. The wrong pair can cause a lot of damage to your joints: most runners who are injured are wearing inappropriate, ill-fitting or worn-out trainers.

When you run, your feet are subjected to a force of up to three times your body weight. So your shoes have to provide good shock absorbency and stability, as well as fitting your foot type, and being able to withstand the strains of life on the road.

TRAINER TESTING

We put 19 best-selling running shoes through several rigorous laboratory tests, designed to simulate hours of training, to find the most durable and comfortable. Four runners also tried out the shoes, under the expert guidance of specialist assessors. For results, see the table on p22, and explanations on this page and overleaf. All the shoes we tested are designed with enough protection for serious runners.

We've also looked at the issues behind the manufacture of the shoes (see p21), to see whether you can pick trainers that aren't made by cheap labour in heavily polluting factories with poor working conditions.

PUT THROUGH THEIR PACES

We checked how well the shoes provided the four basic performance elements that are necessary in any good running shoe: grip, flexibility, cushioning, and water absorption. For details of how the shoes compare, see the 'Performance' section of the table on p22. All the soles offered fairly good grip, but opt for one with a ☆ if you're likely to run in wet conditions.

Flexible feet To enhance comfort, shoes should bend easily in the area in line with the ball of your foot. We checked how well the shoes on test did this before and after 150km of running. The Reebok Premier Lite is particularly supple, while the stiffest shoes we tested were the Adidas A3 Twin Strike, Asics Gel-Cumulus, and Saucony 3D Grid Hurricane 5.

Cushioning Effective shoe cushioning can absorb shocks, helping to reduce the likelihood of injuries such as stress fractures and shin splints. We tested the shock-absorbing properties of the shoes – before and after 150km of running.

All the shoes cushioned well. The amount of cushioning you need depends on how much you run, the surfaces you run on, your weight, and your foot type. If your feet don't roll inwards enough when you run (see 'Shoes to suit your feet', p20), you should choose shoes with plenty of cushioning, as should heavy runners and those who pound the roads for many miles. The Nike Air Pegasus, Saucony Grid Jazz 8, Adidas Supernova Cushion, and Brooks Glycerin provide the best levels of cushioning. There tends to be a trade-off between cushioning and speed, so race shoes have less cushioning than training shoes.

Absorption Sweating feet can not only smell but, if the perspiration's not absorbed, they can make your shoes uncomfortable, too. We tested how well the insoles absorbed water. Most didn't manage particularly well, though the Puma Complete Extol II and Reebok Premier Stability DMX prove that good absorption is possible.

DURABILITY

The last thing you want is a shoe that falls apart halfway through your marathon attempt. To check how hardy they were, we flexed each shoe many thousands of times to see whether it split or tore, and repeatedly compressed all the heels to see how long the shoes' cushioning would last. We also exerted force to tear the uppers and to separate different parts of the shoe.

For details of how each shoe survived, see the 'Durability' section of the table on p22. Most shoes proved fairly durable, though the cushioning on the New Balance M855 was quickest to deteriorate.

Wearing away Insoles and soles that wear out quickly might be a good excuse to cut down on your training, but they don't offer good value for money. The soles of the ▷

Adidas Supernova Cushion were quick to wear, and the insoles of the Reebok Premier Lite, Brooks Glycerin, and Saucony 3D Grid Hurricane 5 also showed some signs of wear after our testing.

You can remove insoles from your running shoes to air or wash them, but don't be tempted to replace a worn insole with a different type unless you do so under expert guidance. The insole is an integral part of the shoe, and offers some shock absorption and support.

SHOES TO SUIT YOUR FEET

The interaction between your feet and your shoes makes the best trainer a very personal choice. Everybody has their own running style, and the particular way you place your feet on the floor can make all the difference to your shoe needs.

Pronation When your heel strikes the ground as you run, your weight is first transferred to the outside of the foot, then the inside. This slight rolling action is called pronation. Some pronation is essential – it's part of the natural shock-absorbing mechanism of the foot. But over-pronation, where the foot rolls too far and too quickly on to its inside edge, can increase the risk of injury. If you're flat-footed (see 'Your foot type', right) and wear down your shoes on the inside edge of the sole, it's likely that you over-pronate when running.

Shoes that correct Some running shoes are designed to counteract over-pronation, but our tests show you can't always rely on what they claim. The shoes we tested were all marketed in one of three categories:

- Neutral – for runners who don't pronate excessively and have a normal foot
- Stability – for mild over-pronation
- Motion-control – a more limited choice for moderate to severe over-pronators. These tend to be heavy, with rigid sides.

With the latest biomechanics technology, we measured what happened when four runners – two over-pronators and two with neutral feet – ran in the shoes. The two models advertised as motion-control shoes (the Mizuno Wave Renegade and Reebok Premier Stability) didn't stand out as particularly controlling. The Nike Structure Triax, Asics GT-2080, Saucony 3D Grid Hurricane 5, Adidas Supernova Control, and Mizuno Wave Maverick 2 – all marketed as stability shoes – offered the most consistent control for mild over-pronators.

Supination Feet that supinate don't roll inwards enough, so don't absorb shocks effectively. High arches and shoes that wear down on the outside edge of the sole are indications that you supinate. If so, choose a shoe with good cushioning (see 'Cushioning', p19), and avoid stability or motion-control shoes, which are designed to stop feet rolling inwards.

SHOE SHOPPING

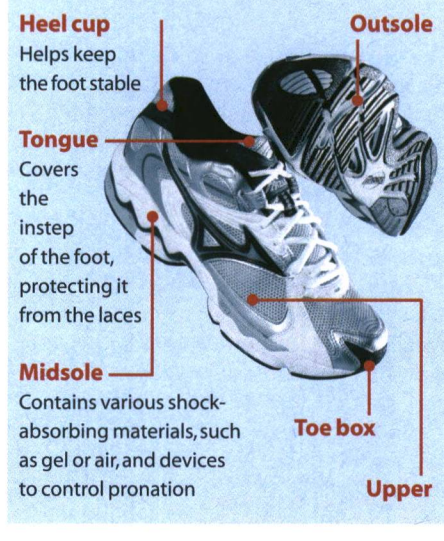
To find a shoe to suit your needs, you need specialist advice from properly trained sales staff. It's best to go to a dedicated running shop – look in running magazines or ask at your local running club. Visit the shop with the socks you normally run in.

Simply trying on a shoe won't be enough to decide whether it's right for you. Good running shops will let you have a short jog around the shop – or even outside – to see how the shoes feel in action. Bear in mind that your feet tend to be tired and more swollen later in the day or after a workout, so shop in the late afternoon or evening to accommodate any increase in foot size.

Fitting tips The right fit is important for both stability and comfort. Be prepared to take your time and try out different styles until you find a good fit. Manufacturers may revamp shoe models without changing their names so you may find one that's worked for you before no longer fits. When trying on shoes, make the following checks:

- you should be able to fit a thumb width between the end of your longest toe and the toe box at the end of the shoe

WHAT'S IN A SHOE?



YOUR FOOT TYPE

Look at your wet footprints to find your foot type. Flat feet tend to over-pronate, while high arches can mean supination (see 'Shoes to suit your feet', left)

Normal, flat, and high-arched footprints (l to r)

- the heel cup should feel snug but not tight and your heels shouldn't slip about
- the widest part of your foot shouldn't hang over the side of the midsole, but the foot shouldn't slide around
- the upper part of the shoe should fit snugly and feel secure; it shouldn't irritate or feel too tight on any part of the foot.

Size matters Running shoes are often smaller than everyday shoes, so expect to go for a half to a full size bigger than normal. The sizing used by different brands can vary greatly, so you might fit comfortably into a size 6 Nike shoe, but need a 6.5 in an Asics and a 7 in an Adidas.

A choice of width fittings clearly increases your chances of getting a good fit. The New Balance and Nike shoes, together with some of the Asics models, come in more than one width fitting, but the other shoes we tested come in only one width.

It's a man's world Most of the shoes we looked at are available in both men's and women's sizes (see table, p22, for details). Manufacturers traditionally produced women's shoes on the men's last and simply gave them a different colour. But women's feet aren't simply scaled-down versions of men's. They differ in various ways, with a higher arch and lower inside ankle bone. We checked the shoes on test for these differences. The Asics GT-2080, Asics Gel-Cumulus IV, Mizuno Wave Maverick 2, and the Nike Air Pegasus are the best adapted for women.

When to buy new shoes You should replace your running shoes after around 500 miles of use. If you're fairly heavy, or run on hard ground, they'll probably wear out sooner. Telltale signs of wear include permanent creases in the midsole and excessive wear on the outsole. Don't be tempted to run in general leisure shoes not designed for running, and try not to use your running shoes for other activities.

Before you buy your next pair, see right for the results of our investigation into shoe manufacturers' ethical practices.

PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO 21, GETTYONE STONE

THE ETHICS OF THE SHOEMAKERS

Can you buy your trainers with a clear conscience? Most major running shoe companies outsource their manufacturing to overseas suppliers, to benefit from cheap production. And newspapers regularly report on the appalling working conditions, low wages, and environmental damage in these factories.

We wanted to investigate whether jogging shoes manufacturers are taking their corporate social responsibility (CSR) seriously – for example by controlling and monitoring conditions at the factories they use. Together with other European consumer organisations, we employed a specialist ethical research company to ask the manufacturers about their activities and policies in the following areas.

Environment Does the company have an environmental policy and environmental management system to control and monitor areas such as pollution, hazardous substances, energy saving, and recycling? Do all sites and suppliers have environmental certification to guarantee certain standards? Do their shoes contain PVC? There are concerns about the chemicals used when PVC is made, and the pollution caused by its disposal.

Social Does the company have a code of conduct on working conditions, wages, benefits, rights to collective bargaining, and non-discrimination? Does it employ effective ways to monitor these conditions, including auditing by a third party?

Transparency Is the above information easily available to the public?

Only three companies responded fully, despite several reminders. Where they didn't respond, we gathered information from publicly available sources, such as annual reports. See below for a summary of what we found out about each company. For more on each company, visit www.which.co.uk/whichextra.

Adidas, New Balance, Reebok, Nike, and Puma have all taken steps to address environmental and social issues. It's likely that they've instigated policies partly in response to widespread negative reports in the past. The companies are listed below from best to worst. Sadly, none is yet doing enough. None allows conditions at all its factories to be monitored by third parties, and none mentions that it pays workers a fair or 'living' wage (this may be more than the legal minimum, and is enough to cover basic needs). We think all companies should address these issues, and make information about them publicly available.

SOME ETHICAL INITIATIVES

Adidas, New Balance, Reebok, Nike, and Puma all put pressure on suppliers to pay at least the minimum wage, plus all legal benefits and overtime pay.

Adidas

Responded fully

Environment The company's environmental policy focuses on avoiding hazardous substances in production, and improving its suppliers' environmental performance. Some of the factories it uses have environmental certification. The Supernova Cushion is PVC-free.

Social Adidas tries to give long-term contracts to suppliers, in order to create more stable working relationships. Problems reported in the past included poor working conditions, long overtime, and intimidation of women. Adidas has shown a willingness to improve matters, by setting higher standards for labour rights, trying to define a fair wage, and providing training.

Transparency Good quality social and environmental information is publicly available.

New Balance

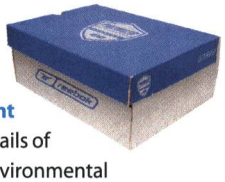
Responded fully

Environment Told us it's committed to protecting the environment. None of its sites has environmental certification. Aims to reduce the use of hazardous materials. The M855 is PVC-free.

Social Owns five manufacturing sites in the US and one in the UK, but relies on Asian suppliers for the bulk of its manufacturing. Reports in the past have criticised working conditions in Chinese factories. We're unable to verify this, as New Balance externally audits the conditions in only some of its suppliers' factories.

Transparency No environmental report, but the supplier code of conduct is publicly available.

Reebok



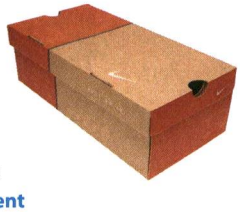
No response

Environment Gives no details of suppliers' environmental performance. In final stages of making all footwear PVC-free. The shoes on test don't contain PVC.

Social Makes no distinction between a minimum wage and a fair wage. Reports have surfaced in the past about labour conditions and wages in China and Indonesia. As Reebok doesn't monitor conditions in all its suppliers' factories, we can't disprove these reports.

Transparency Good information about human rights; less available on environmental issues.

Nike



No response, due to pending US law suit

Environment Comprehensive environmental policy, and environmental management at all sites. Nike is phasing out the use of PVC, and none of the shoes on test contains PVC.

Social Minimum working age of 18, the highest standard in the sector. However, Nike is still often criticised for conditions in Asian factories.

Transparency Good quality social and environmental information is publicly available.

Puma

Responded fully

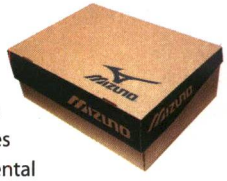
Environment Environmental policy focuses on banning hazardous substances from production. Aims to improve the environmental performance of suppliers via training and an environmental officer. The Complete Extol II is PVC-free.

Social Aims for employees to have dignity and not be subjected to discrimination. However, it gave no definition of a fair wage. It audits working conditions in its supplier factories, but doesn't allow third party auditing to check conditions.

Transparency Limited amount of publicly available information on social and environmental issues.

NO INFORMATION

Mizuno



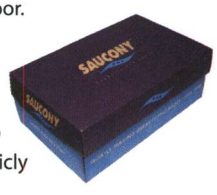
No response

Environment Mizuno's Japanese offices and factories all have environmental certification. There is no information available about the environmental practices of its suppliers.

Social No information publicly available.

Transparency Poor.

Saucony



No response

Environment No information publicly available.

Social No information publicly available.

Transparency Poor.

Brooks

No response

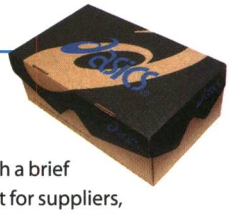
Environment No information publicly available.

Social No information publicly available.

Transparency Poor. Brooks isn't listed on the stock market, so doesn't have to publish an annual report.

LIMITED ETHICAL INITIATIVES

Asics



Limited response

Environment Annual report has no information about the environmental practices of its suppliers. The shoes on test don't contain PVC.

Social Asics provided us with a brief code of conduct for suppliers, but no details of implementation or monitoring.

Transparency Very little information publicly available.

▷

RUNNING SHOES

		Adidas A3 Twin Strike	Adidas Supernova Control	Adidas Supernova Cushion	Asics Gel-Cumulus IV	Asics Gel-Kumo	Asics GT-2080	Brooks Adrenaline GTS IV	Brooks Glycerin	Mizuno Wave Maverick 2	Mizuno Wave Renegade
SPECIFICATION											
Price (£)	1▷	100	70	70	65	75	75	75	80	60	90
Sizes available (men) Sizes available (women)	2▷	6 - 13.5 4 - 8	6 - 13.5 4 - 8	6 - 13.5 4 - 8	6-12,13,14 3-9	6-12,13,14 3-9	6-12,13,14,15 3-9	7-13 4-9	7-13 4-8	6-12,13 4-9	6-12,13,14
Weight (g)	3▷	824	667	753	654	722	644	657	642	700	836
DURABILITY											
Tear/flex resistance (upper)	4▷	★	☆	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
Sole adhesion	5▷	★	★	★	★	★	★	☆	☆	☆	★
Toe adhesion	5▷	★	★	○	☆	☆	★	☆	☆	★	★
Sole flexing durability	6▷	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
Abrasion resistance (insole)	7▷	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	○	★	★
Abrasion resistance (sole)	7▷	★	○	◒	☆	☆	○	★	★	★	★
Cushioning durability	8▷	☆	○	☆	☆	○	☆	☆	☆	○	○
PERFORMANCE											
Flexibility	9▷	◒	☆	☆	◒	○	☆	☆	☆	○	○
Absorption (insole)	10▷	◒	◒	◒	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Grip		☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	○	☆	☆
INFORMATION											
Additional notes/ update since our test			Colours change in July	Colours change in July	To be replaced by Gel-Cumulus V in July, with technical and colour changes. Some IVs may still be available	Colours change in July. Size 3 to be phased out	Colours change in July				Not available in women's sizes

Adidas A3 Twin Strike

Adidas Supernova Control

Adidas Supernova Cushion

Asics Gel-Cumulus IV

Brooks Glycerin

Mizuno Wave Maverick 2

Mizuno Wave Renegade

New Balance 830

Nike Structure Triax

Puma Complete Extol II

Reebok Premier Lite

Reebok Premier Stability DMX

lew Balance 30	New Balance M855	Nike Air Pegasus	Nike Structure Triax	Puma Complete Extol II	Reebok Premier Lite	Reebok Premier Stability DMX	Saucony 3D Grid Hurricane 5	Saucony Grid Jazz 8
0	70	60	70	60	50	70	90	60
.5-12.5 -9	6.5-15.5 3-10	6-13,14,15 5-11,12	6-13,14,15 5-11,12	6-13 3-8	6-12.5,13,14 3-9	6-12.5,13,14 3-8	6-13 4-8	6-12 4-9
79	796	694	738	671	685	827	779	628
★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
☆	☆	★	☆	○	★	★	★	☆
☆	★	★	★	☆	★	★	☆	☆
★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
★	★	★	★	★	◒	★	○	★
○	★	★	★	★	★	☆	★	★
○	●	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	○	○
☆	○	☆	☆	☆	★	☆	◒	○
◒	◒	●	◒	★	●	★	◒	●
☆	☆	○	☆	○	☆	☆	○	○
		Colours have changed	Replaced by new model. Some stocks of tested model may still be available					

NOTES
Shoes highlighted in **red** are featured in the Best Buy Guide, below.

Specification
1 This is the manufacturer's guide price. Most specialist running shops will offer a discount to members of running clubs.
2 Where a range is given, half sizes are available throughout the range.
3 The weight of a pair of size 8 (42) men's shoes.

Durability
4 We checked how easy it was to tear the material of the upper shoe and whether the upper showed signs of wear after the shoe had been flexed thousands of times.
5 Shoes with the best ratings were hardest to separate.
6 Whether the sole split when we flexed the shoe thousands of times.
7 We simulated the effects of a sock rubbing against the insole and of the shoe rubbing against the ground to see how well the shoes resisted abrasion.
8 Shoes that did well in this test should keep their cushioning properties longer than those that scored poorly.

Performance
9 We measured the force it took to bend the shoes to an angle of 45 degrees. We repeated the test after the shoes had been used to run 150km.
10 We checked how well the insole absorbed water.

KEY
★ ☆ ○ ◒ ●
best — worst

Asics Gel-Kumo

Asics GT-2080

Brooks Adrenaline GTS IV

New Balance M855

Nike Air Pegasus

Saucony 3D Grid Hurricane 5

Saucony Grid Jazz 8

WRITE BACK

If you have comments or questions about anything you've read in *Which?* this month, contact us at **writeback@which.net.** We publish answers to some of your questions in 'Write back', p4, and more online at **www.which.co.uk/whichextra**

BEST BUYS

The fit of a shoe is highly individual, so none of the shoes we've tested will suit everyone, no matter how well they did in tests. We've made our recommendations from among the most durable and flexible, but it's still essential to try shoes before you buy to see how they feel.

The amount of cushioning and pronation control you need from a running shoe will vary according to your foot type (see 'Shoes to suit your feet', p20), how heavy you are, and the sort of surfaces you tend to run on.

The **Nike Air Pegasus £60** is one of the best shoes on test. It has excellent cushioning, so is particularly suitable for supinators, as well as neutral runners. The **Reebok Premier Lite £50** and the **Asics Gel-Kumo £75** are also good choices for neutral feet. Over-pronators should try the **Nike Structure Triax £70**, or the **Saucony 3D Grid Hurricane 5 £90**.

Rebecca Fearnley checks out the big banks and finds that loyalty doesn't always pay

Sizing up the BIG BANKS

Putting all your financial eggs in one basket could cost you hundreds of pounds. We check out the best and worst deals from the biggest banks and building societies

Banks like to try to sell you things. Whichever bank you've got your current account with, the chances are you're bombarded with offers for its other products. But taking up these offers could be expensive. While we've seen improvements in some of the banks' products since we last looked in 1999, none of them offers consistently good value. Even if your current account or mortgage is a good deal, don't trust your bank to offer you a competitive loan or savings account as well.

BANKS UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

Ninety per cent of *Which?* members have their current account with one of the 11 biggest banks and building societies – Abbey National, Alliance & Leicester, Bank of Scotland, Barclays, First Direct, Halifax, HSBC, Lloyds TSB, Nationwide, NatWest and The Royal Bank of Scotland – and more than 60 per cent bank with one of the big four – Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds TSB and NatWest. In our charts, opposite and overleaf, we've compared everyday financial products offered by these 11 companies with our Best Buys. We've chosen nine products covering savings, borrowing and insurance, plus current accounts, and used particular scenarios to illustrate the costs. Where the provider has more than one account or product that fits our criteria, we've shown the best rates or costs available. We've shown rates that anyone can get, so we've excluded deals that are available only online. These will often be cheaper, though, so they're worth checking out if you have internet access.

The rates shown were correct at 10 April 2003, with the exception of travel insurance, where the figures are taken from April's Best Buy report ('Will your travel insurance really cover you?', *Which?*, April 2003, p35), and house insurance, where the figures are from the analysis for a report due to be published next month.

Inconsistent rates The banks we looked at offer a mixed bag of products. None of them offers good value for all nine products, although a few do offer the best rates for one or two. That said, none of them was consistently worst value, either.

Bottom of the heap Alliance & Leicester stands out as the bank with the most expensive all-round deal. Its loan and savings account aren't too bad, but its mortgage and contents and buildings insurance languish at the bottom of our league tables, and most of its other products are pretty mediocre.

In the table, below, we've compared eight Alliance & Leicester products with Best Buys. In total, if you had these products with Alliance & Leicester, you'd be £1,502 a year worse off than if you had Best Buys. Alliance & Leicester's expensive mortgage makes up a lot of this cost. Take this out of the equation and The Royal Bank of Scotland becomes the worst value, costing a total of £715 a year more than our Best Buys.

Nationwide is the cheapest provider when you compare its products with Best Buys, although they still cost almost £700 a year more than if you had Best Buys.

OUR VERDICT

None of the banks can be relied on to give you consistently good value – and, in some cases, they're just plain expensive. So next time you need a loan or a savings account, for example, don't just pick up the phone to your bank. If you shop around, there's a good chance you'll find a much better deal elsewhere, and the savings you make could add up to hundreds of pounds. And, if you find yourself stuck in an uncompetitive account, switch. It's easy to switch any of the products and, if you make the right choice, you could be a lot better off.

BEST AND WORST COMPARED

	Alliance & Leicester	Best Buys	Annual saving
Mortgage	£4,632	£3,420	£1,212
Contents insurance	£107	£52	£55
Buildings insurance	£178	£102	£76
Isa	£570	£653	£83
Current account	£21	£30	£9
Personal loan	£1,877	£1,850	£27
Easy access savings	£165	£188	£23
Credit card	£39	£22	£17
Total saving			**£1,502**

The table shows the annual costs or interest earned on each product using the scenarios for the charts, opposite and overleaf. For current accounts, we've shown the interest earned on a £1,000 balance. Alliance & Leicester does not offer standalone annual travel insurance

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN TRENHOLM ILLUSTRATION JACEY

Nine everyday financial products compared

Alliance & Leicester is worst overall

It still pays to shop around

BANKING AND SAVING

We've looked at the interest you receive on your current account when you're in credit, and the best rates of interest on two types of savings account.

Current accounts The big four banks, plus The Royal Bank of Scotland (which owns NatWest) lag behind the rest when it comes to paying interest when you're in credit. They pay a miserly 0.1 per cent, no matter how much you pay in (although Lloyds TSB offers a better deal to its online customers who pay in £1,000 a month or more). All the other big banks do better than this, and three offer the best rate, as long as you pay a certain amount in each month – we've shown the rate for £1,000 minimum. If you pay in less than £1,000, these rates fall with all the providers except Alliance & Leicester. Its rate of 2.12 per cent stays the same as long as you pay in £500 or more each month. If you're thinking of switching accounts, check out our switching site www.switchwithwhich.co.uk or 'Current affairs', *Which?*, December 2002, p46.

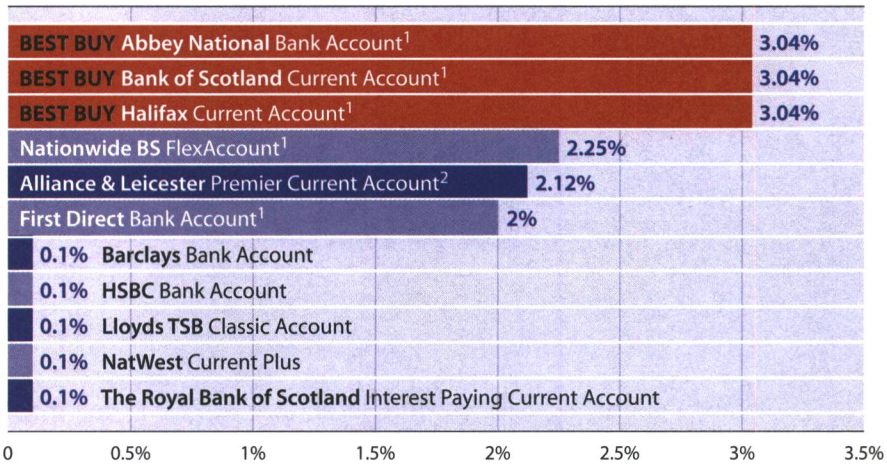
Easy access savings Lloyds TSB's Flexible Savings account is the worst on offer, paying a measly 0.20 per cent on a £5,000 balance, which amounts to just £10 a year. Barclays' Instant Savings account and The Royal Bank of Scotland's Gold Deposit are only marginally better, at 0.25 per cent.

This is one of the few products where one of the big banks has a best value account, with Bank of Scotland's i.save account coming out on top with a rate of 3.75 per cent. Even with the next best account on offer, Alliance & Leicester's Easy Saver, you'd be £20 a year worse off. Online, you can get rates as high as 4 per cent.

Mini cash Isas There's much less difference between the best and worst rates on mini cash Isas than there is with instant access savings. However, the difference is still worth almost £100 a year if you'd been putting your £3,000 allowance away every year since Isas were introduced in 1999.

HSBC offers top rates on its mini cash Isa, paying 4.35 per cent. And another of the big four, Lloyds TSB, runs a close second with its rate of 4.25 per cent. The lowest rate we found was 3.70 per cent at Bank of Scotland, Halifax and First Direct.

CREDIT INTEREST ON A CURRENT ACCOUNT



Excludes internet-based accounts. **1** Funding of £1,000 a month required **2** Funding of £500 a month required

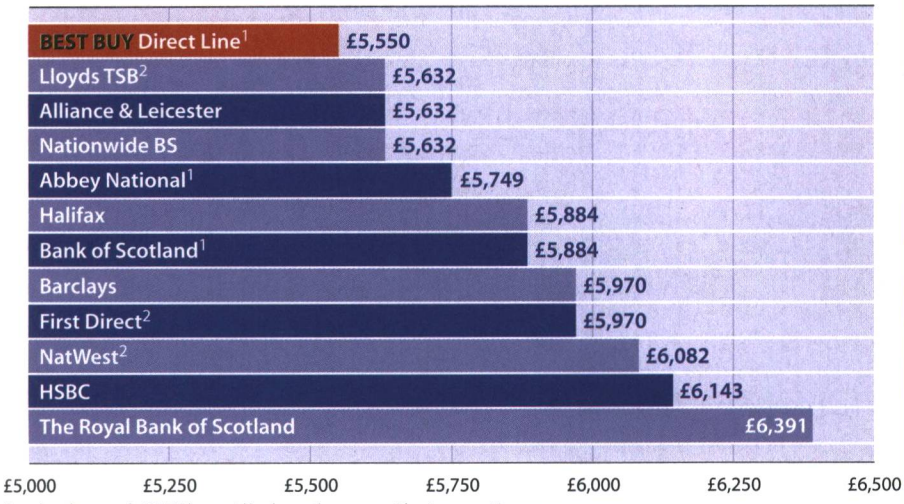
ANNUAL INTEREST ON A £5,000 EASY ACCESS SAVINGS ACCOUNT

All accounts shown have no restrictions on number of withdrawals per year, are available nationally and are not tied to other products. Excludes internet-only accounts. **1** Transactions via nominated account **2** £1 fee for counter withdrawals. Cashcard-based account **3** Cashcard available **4** Rate reduced to 1.6 per cent for counter transactions. Cashcard-based account

ANNUAL INTEREST ON A £15,000 MINI CASH ISA

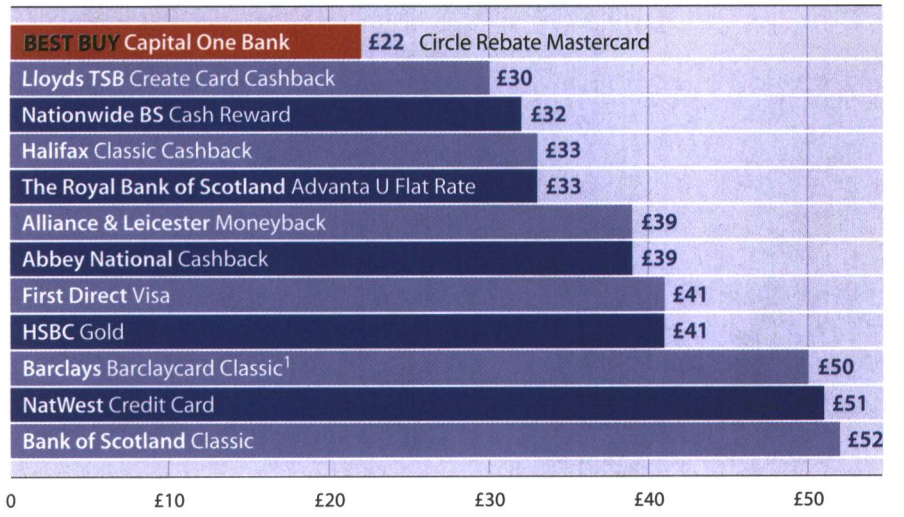
Includes only instant access Isas that meet the Cat standard. Temporary bonuses have been excluded. **1** Cashcard available

COST OF A £5,000 PERSONAL LOAN OVER THREE YEARS



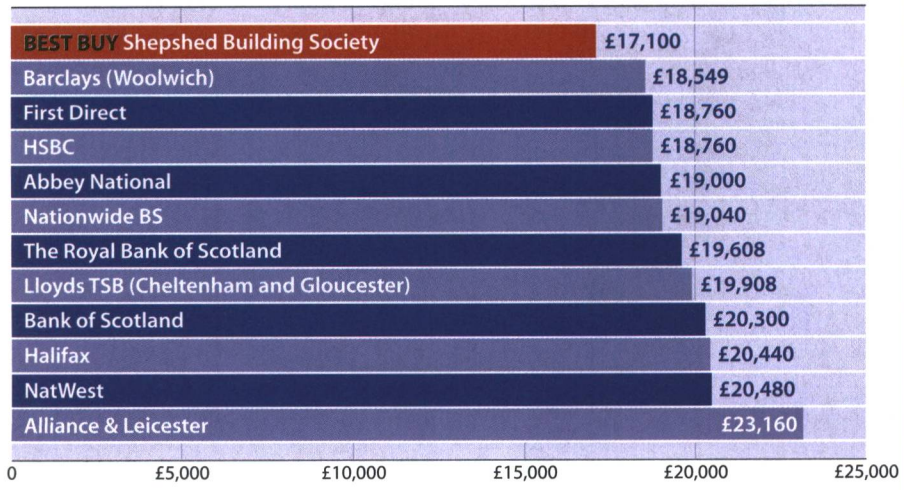
Based on the cost of a £5,000 loan paid back over three years without payment insurance.
1 Typical APR. Rates could be higher depending on your credit scoring 2 Account required with lender

ANNUAL COST OF BORROWING ON A CREDIT CARD



Based on someone who spends £2,550 in a year, pays off the full balance three times a year, and pays a quarter of the outstanding balance the rest of the time. 1 We've used its typical rate. Rate varies depending on credit scoring

COST OF AN £80,000 MORTGAGE OVER FIVE YEARS



Based on the cost over five years of an £80,000 interest-only loan at 95 per cent LTV, including any arrangement fees.

BORROWING

The more you want to borrow, the more it pays to shop around. Our research shows big gaps between the cheapest and most expensive credit.

Personal loans There are big differences between providers in the cost of personal loans. At 6.9 per cent, borrowing £5,000 over three years from Direct Line would cost you £280 a year less than from The Royal Bank of Scotland, which, at 16.7 per cent, is the most expensive of the big banks.

All the rates shown are available from branches or over the phone. It's worth checking online rates, though, as these can be much cheaper. The Royal Bank of Scotland, for example, has a rate of just 9.9 per cent, which would cost almost £600 less than its branch-based loan.

Credit cards Which card is best for you depends on how you use it. If you pay off the balance in full every month, the APR doesn't really matter, whereas if you tend to have a balance outstanding, a low interest rate – around 13 per cent or less – is more important. It's also worth looking at whether the card gives you cashback on your spending.

We've looked at the costs of different cards for someone who only occasionally pays off their balance. The most expensive card offered by any of the big banks is Bank of Scotland's Classic card. This is closely followed by NatWest's credit card and Barclaycard. Capital One's Circle Rebate Mastercard, on the other hand, would cost less than half as much as any of these cards, largely because of its generous 1 per cent cashback on purchases. Some of the online cards also offer a good deal.

Mortgages So that we can easily compare the costs, we've looked at the best penalty-free variable rate deal offered by the big providers. No penalties means you're free to move your mortgage whenever you want, although there may be other costs, which you should take into account. If you're on one of these rates, though, think about switching. The chances are you'll find a cheaper fixed or discounted deal if you shop around.

Alliance & Leicester has the most expensive mortgage. Its penalty-free variable rate mortgage means you're stuck with its standard variable rate, which at 5.79 per cent is pretty high. The best deal we found was from Shepshed Building Society. Its penalty-free variable rate mortgage has a rate of 4.25 per cent, with a guarantee that it won't go above the Bank of England Base Rate plus 0.50 per cent for the life of the mortgage.

INSURANCE

When it's time to renew your house or travel insurance, it can be tempting just to call up your bank. The big banks don't tend to offer the cheapest deals, though, so it pays to shop around.

Travel insurance If you go on holiday a few times a year, annual travel insurance can be a convenient and cheap way to make sure you're covered. We've used the data from April's travel insurance report ('Will your travel insurance really cover you?', *Which*?, April 2003, p35) to compare the cost of an annual policy covering a family of two adults and two children for holidays anywhere in the world. This policy would cost you over £100 more if you bought it from The Royal Bank of Scotland than if you went to Direct Travel. And, at £163, HSBC's policy isn't much cheaper. Even the best of the biggest providers, Nationwide, costs over £30 more than the Best Buy.

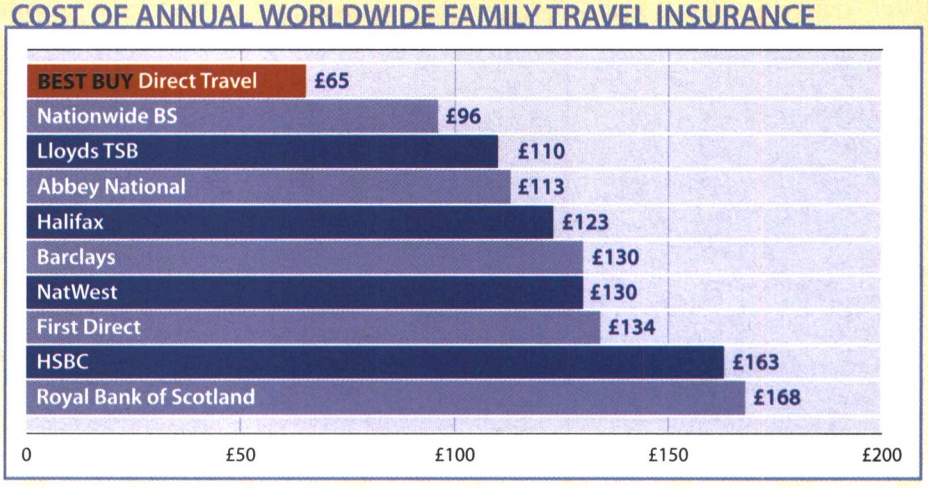
Buildings and contents insurance We've used the analysis from next month's house insurance report to compare the buildings and contents insurance available from the big banks. We've compared quotes for someone aged 60 living in a low-risk area. We show the average of five quotes each company gave us for this scenario. Some companies quote according to how many bedrooms a house has ('bedroom rated'), while others quote according to how much cover you need ('sum insured'). We've compared the big banks with a Best Buy for each, depending on how they quote.

House insurance quotes vary considerably depending on your individual circumstances, and we've got room to show only one typical scenario. It's probably worth getting a quote from your bank for your own situation. There's a good chance you'll get a better deal elsewhere, though, so compare quotes from a few companies. See next month's issue for a comprehensive list of Best Buy insurers.

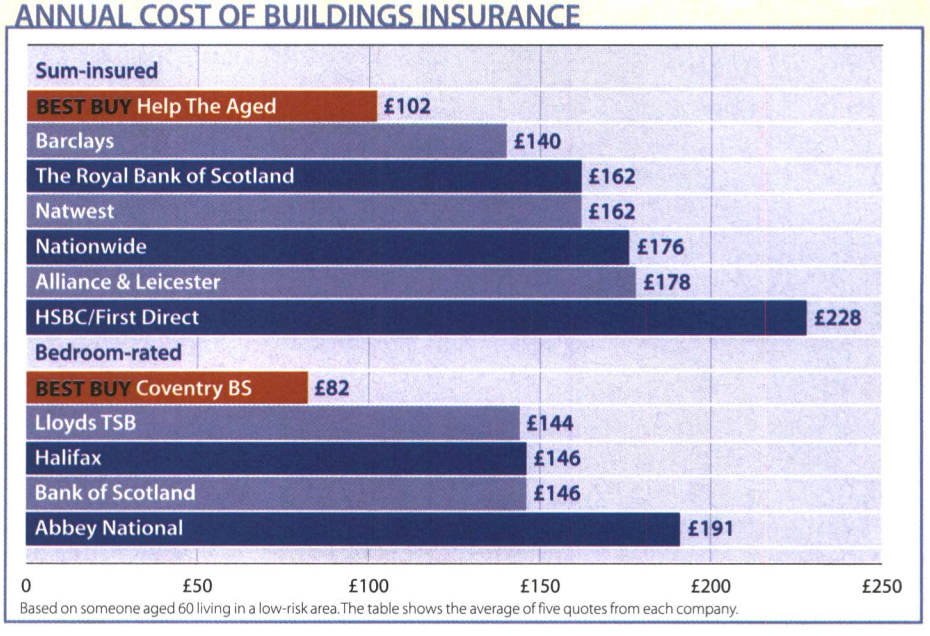
There was quite a lot of variation in the quotes we got for buildings insurance. None of the big banks came particularly close to the Best Buys. The best was Barclays, whose quote was only £38 more than the Best Buy. HSBC/First Direct's quote was the most expensive, at over £120 more.

There was less difference in the contents insurance quotes, although the most expensive, from Alliance & Leicester, was still more than twice as much as the cheapest sum-insured policy, from Help the Aged.

COST OF ANNUAL WORLDWIDE FAMILY TRAVEL INSURANCE

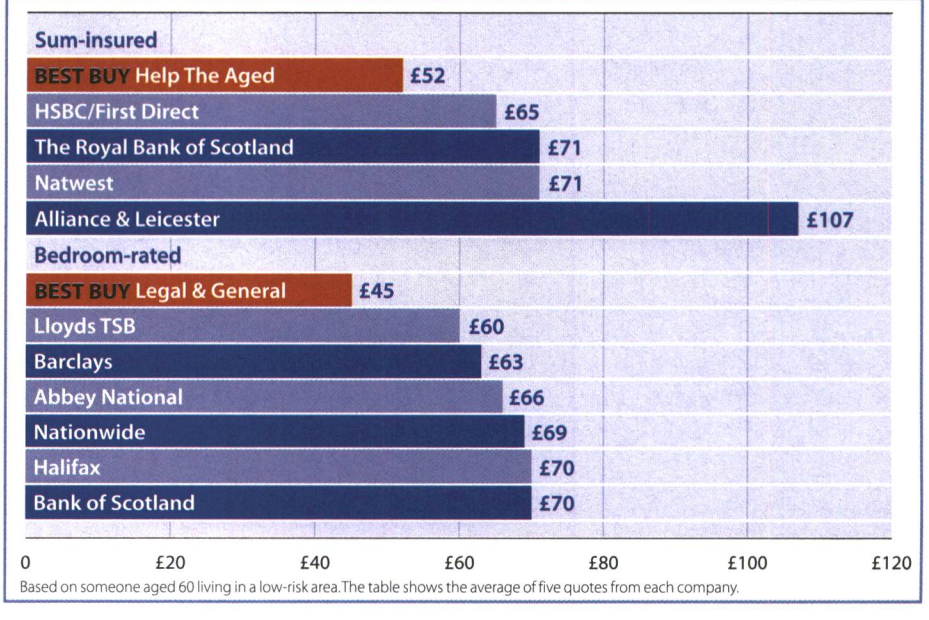


ANNUAL COST OF BUILDINGS INSURANCE



Based on someone aged 60 living in a low-risk area. The table shows the average of five quotes from each company.

ANNUAL COST OF CONTENTS INSURANCE



Based on someone aged 60 living in a low-risk area. The table shows the average of five quotes from each company.

CORK'S OUT FOR SUMMER

Screwcapped wine is convenient – and it can taste good. But the winners in our tasting weren't cheap

Though most wines still come with a natural cork stopper, these days screw caps are more in evidence. And it's not just the old-fashioned litre bottles of Liebfraumilch and Lambrusco you'll see with screw caps. More modern, premium styles of wine now have screw caps, as wine producers look for alternative closures to cork.

There are advantages to buying wine under screw cap. For a start, you don't need a corkscrew, and a screwcapped bottle is easier to reseal. Screw caps also eliminate any possibility of cork taint. But is it just a matter of packaging? To find out what the wine itself is like, we gave a selection of red and white screwcapped wines to a panel of professional tasters.

CONTAMINATED CORKS

Natural cork bark is unreliable – and contaminated corks really can spoil the end product, producing musty, rather mouldy characteristics. Although a wine can be badly musty, in other cases the taint is subtle, simply flattening the fresh fruitiness of the wine. The incidence of 'corked' wine is hard to pinpoint, but estimates range from around one in eight bottles to one in 20. Whichever figure you take, it adds up to a lot of spoilt wine.

SECURE SEALS

Winemakers who champion screw caps believe they provide secure seals that don't allow leakage or air into the wine, which can result in oxidation. The wine, therefore, stays fresh and lively for longer. Some experts also claim that screw caps are more necessary for light white wines, as these reportedly show more clearly signs of cork taint.

TWISTS AND TURNS

We asked the major supermarkets and off-licence chains to nominate three wines with screw caps from their lists. They could be any colour, any price, any grape style, from any country, and vintage or non-vintage, but they had to be dry or off-dry, still rather than sparkling, and available in 75cl bottles. We selected 16 from those nominated. In addition, we chose 16 wines with natural cork stoppers that were as close as we could find in style, country of origin and price, to use as a control group. We wanted to find out whether there were any differences in quality and,

OUR SURVEY

We posted a survey on Which? Extra between 3 and 24 March 2003, asking *Which?* members about their wine drinking habits. We received a total of 1,718 replies. Thanks to everyone who took part.

CONVENIENT? YES. POPULAR? NOT REALLY

Wine producers may be out to convince us of the benefits of screw caps, but they face a battle against its bad image, if our survey is anything to go by. Though 73 per cent of our respondents said they've bought screwcapped wine at some point, 75 per cent agreed that it is 'not really as socially acceptable as wine with a cork', and 54 per cent thought that 'wine in a screwcapped bottle is likely to be of lower quality than wine bottled with cork'. Our tasting clearly contradicts the latter.

Most respondents didn't consider cork taint a big problem – less than half agreed either strongly or slightly that it's worth buying wine in screwcapped bottles to avoid it.

Undoubtedly, the real advantage of screwcapped wine is its convenience. In our survey, 71 per cent agreed either strongly or slightly that it's more convenient.

So screwcapped wine is convenient and can taste good. But what about environmental issues? Fears have been expressed that the use of alternative closures may threaten the cork forests of Portugal and Spain, important natural habitats for certain birds and other wildlife. In addition, natural corks are biodegradable while screw caps aren't. But chemicals such as chlorine are usually used to bleach corks before use so they're not totally environmentally friendly. And it should be possible to recycle aluminium screw caps just as you do aluminium cans.

Plastic stoppers are also popular now. They eliminate cork taint just as screw caps do – but they aren't biodegradable or recyclable, are more difficult than a cork or a screw cap to replace, and can be tricky to remove from a corkscrew.

PHOTOGRAPHY TIM HILL

more importantly, how many of the wines under cork showed signs of cork taint. We couldn't taste exactly the same wines under screw cap and cork because most producers have either made the switch or not, though a few do use both methods for the same wine.

We gave the wines to eight professional wine tasters who tasted them blind (the labels were covered) in four separate groups – white screwcapped, white with corks, red screwcapped, and red with corks (the tasters knew what the groups were). Each taster awarded a mark to every wine tasted, and the scores were averaged to find the results.

HATS OFF TO CAPS

Our experts were impressed by the freshness of the whites under screw cap – these received the highest average score of the four groups. The panel felt that, overall, they seemed 'fresher, more characterful' and 'more vibrant' than the whites under cork. The reds didn't produce as marked a contrast, and the average marks for reds under cork and screw cap were very similar. The reds overall were considered inferior to the whites, prompting one taster to suggest that producers 'are putting better whites than reds under screw caps' and bearing out the view that screw caps are particularly suitable for white wine.

Tasters found only one of our 16 control wines to be overtly corked, although several had their doubts about two or three others. All were white.

In general, the panel was in favour of screw caps. So our conclusion is that, if you see a style of white wine that you'd consider buying under cork, it's likely to be even more reliable under screw cap.

BEST BUYS

Three dry screwcapped white wines topped our tasting, all of them Sauvignon Blancs from the Marlborough region of New Zealand. Top was **Jackson Estate Sauvignon Blanc 2002** (Majestic, Tesco and Waitrose, **£8.99**), described as 'very fresh, with gooseberry and citrus notes' and 'well balanced'. **Kim Crawford Sauvignon Blanc 2002** (Unwins, **£8.99**), praised for its 'clean, crisp, juicy passion fruit flavours', came second. Both wines scored ★.

Third best was the **Dashwood Sauvignon Blanc 2002** (Oddbins, **£7.49**), which the panel thought relatively 'light', with 'tropical fruit' and 'sherbet lemon' flavour. It scored ☆.

Scoring lower marks than several white wines, but nonetheless the best red wine on test, was the screwcapped **Rutherglen Estates Durif 2002, Victoria, Australia** (Waitrose, **£6.99**, also Asda, **£5.96**) which tasters liked for its 'dark berry fruit'. It also scored ☆.

OTHER WINES ON TEST (IN ORDER OF MERIT)

SCREWCAPPED

4 Tim Adams Riesling 2002, Clare Valley, Australia (Tesco, £7.49) ☆
5 Villa Maria Private Bin Sauvignon Blanc 2002, Marlborough, New Zealand (Sainsbury's, £7.99, and others) ☆
6 The Boulders Viognier 2001, California (Co-op, £4.99) ☆
7 Rutherglen Estates Durif 2002 (see 'Best Buy Guide', above)
=8 Torres Vina Esmeralda 2002, Penedès, Spain (Tesco, £4.99, and others) ☆
=8 Wither Hills Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough 2002 (Waitrose, £7.99, and others) ☆
10 Almond Grove Dry Riesling 2001, Pfalz, Germany (Somerfield, £3.99, and others) ☆
11 The Boulders Petite Sirah 2001, California (Co-op, £4.99) ○
12 Waitrose Petit Chablis 2002, France (£6.99) ○
13 Peter Lehmann Grenache 2001, Barossa, Australia (Oddbins, £4.99, and others) ○
14 Tesco Unwind Cabernet Sauvignon, Central Valley, Chile (£4.99) ○
15 Peter Lehmann Semillon 2001, Barossa, Australia (Oddbins, £5.49, and others) ○
16 Tapas Tinto Vino de Mesa, Spain (Thresher, £2.99) ◒

UNDER CORK

1 Montana Reserve Sauvignon Blanc Vineyard Selection 2002, Marlborough, New Zealand (Oddbins, £7.99, and others) ☆
2 Selaks Sauvignon Blanc 2002, Marlborough, New Zealand (Oddbins, £7.99) ☆
=3 Bethany Riesling 2002, Barossa Valley, Australia (Majestic, £5.99, and others) ☆
=3 Jacobs Creek Reserve Shiraz 1999, South Australia (Sainsbury's, £8.99, and others) ☆
5 Penfolds Kalimna Bin 28 Shiraz 1999, Australia (Sainsbury's, £9.99, and others) ○[1]
6 Protocolo Tinto, Spain (Majestic, £3.99) ○
7 Sincerely Sauvignon Blanc 2001, Franschhoek, South Africa (Sainsbury's, £6.99, and others) ○
8 Marks & Spencer Petit Chablis 2001, France (£7.99) ○
9 Riesling Ruppertsberg 2002, Pfalz, Germany (Majestic, £4.49) ○
10 Vistasur Cabernet Sauvignon 2001, Maipo, Chile (Majestic, £4.99) ○
11 Jacobs Creek Chardonnay 2002, Barossa, Australia (Majestic, £4.99, and others) ○
12 Torres Vina Sol 2002, Penedès, Spain (Majestic, £4.49, and others) ◒
13 Bonterra Organic Chardonnay 2001, Mendocino, California (Sainsbury's, £8.49, and others) ◒
14 E&J Gallo Ruby Cabernet 2001, California (Waitrose, £4.49, and others) ◒
15 Touraine Sauvignon Les Brémailles 2001, France (Oddbins, £4.99) ●

Not rated (corked)

Fairleigh Estate Single Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc 2002, Marlborough, New Zealand (Majestic, £6.99)

1 No longer sold by Sainsbury's but may be available from other outlets

KEY

★ ☆ ○ ◒ ●

best ⟷ worst

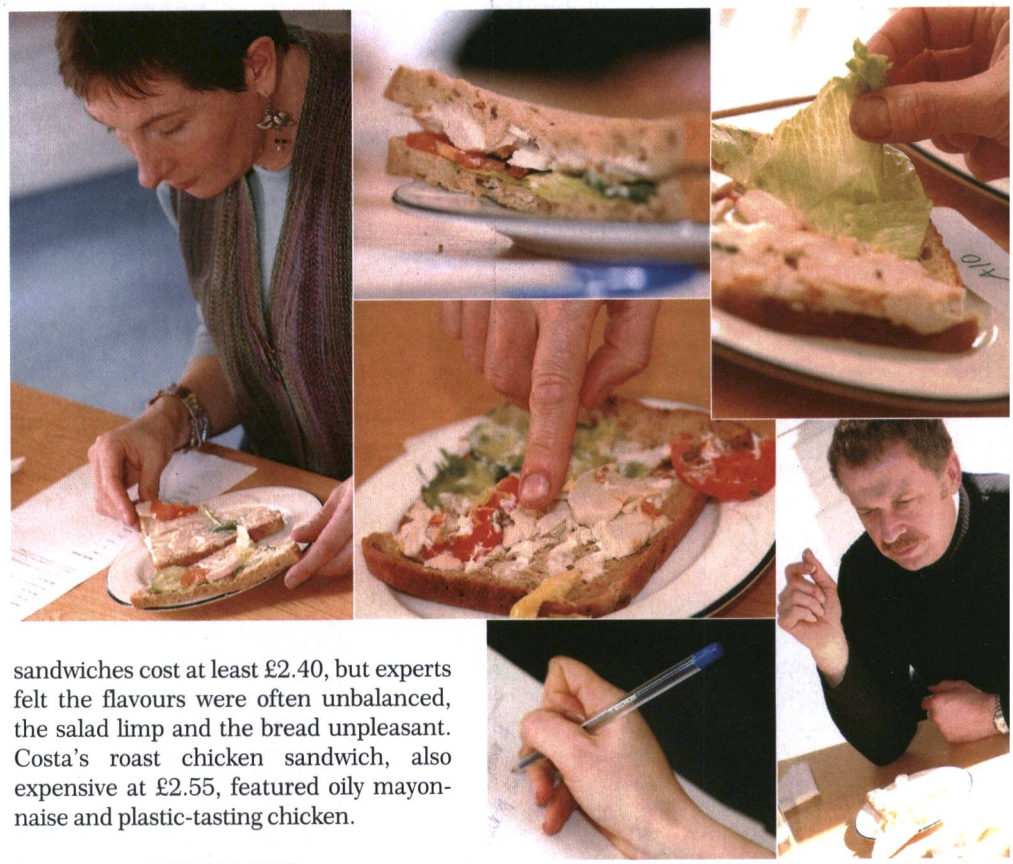
BREAD WINNERS AND

Our experts give their verdicts on 36 sandwiches from popular supermarkets, cafés and bakers

Pre-packed sandwiches are ideal for lunch on the run or a picnic in the park. We spend more than £3 billion a year eating sandwiches costing as much as £3 a packet. They're on sale virtually everywhere, from the corner shop to the supermarket to upmarket cafés. So where should you get yours?

We set about looking for some truly great sandwiches from the high street – but none of the major chains we visited seems to have mastered the sandwich-making art. Our dedicated experts tasted 36 cheese, tuna and chicken sandwiches, and felt that only three deserved more than six out of ten. Many ingredients were poor quality or past their best: our tasters endured rubbery cheese, pink chicken, soggy bread, limp lettuce and tasteless tuna.

Our league tables, right and overleaf, show you the experts' favourites. But if you want a really satisfying sandwich for lunch, you might just have to get up early and make your own.



TOP OF THE SHOPS

The best retailers were Coffee Republic, Pret A Manger, Tesco and Waitrose, though they weren't consistently good. Our experts were less impressed with the sandwiches from Boots, Starbucks and Marks & Spencer, giving them all less than five out of ten.

Value for money High prices didn't necessarily mean better quality, or increased quantity. Cheaper options were sometimes tastier and more generously filled. And it seems that some of the café chains should stick to making coffee. All three Starbucks sandwiches cost at least £2.40, but experts felt the flavours were often unbalanced, the salad limp and the bread unpleasant. Costa's roast chicken sandwich, also expensive at £2.55, featured oily mayonnaise and plastic-tasting chicken.

INGREDIENTS INSPECTED

'There's nothing that gets the complete balance of textures and flavours right,' one expert concluded. With all the sandwiches they tasted, one or more of the ingredients were a bit of a letdown.

Greasy cheese The best cheese sandwich on test was from Greggs. Our experts enjoyed the mature cheddar, and thought that Greggs had spent money on the cheese. They also praised the mature cheddar in the Coffee Republic sandwich.

However, they felt the flavour of some other cheese sandwiches was sacrificed in favour of easy to slice cheese. Tesco's cheese was 'mild', 'plasticky' and 'greasy', for example, while Marks & Spencer's was 'bland', Boots' was 'unpleasant tasting', and Costa's was 'rubbery' and 'sour'.

Choice chicken? The favourite chicken sandwich was from Waitrose: it was well filled, with relatively good quality chicken. But our experts expressed concern about the quality of chicken in some other sandwiches. Coffee Republic's chicken caesar, for example, contained shredded bits of chicken, including what looked like skin. The chicken in the Costa sandwich had a 'strange' flavour. And one Marks & Spencer's chicken sandwich contained

THE TESTING

Our panel of expert tasters were: Charles Bamford, Bakery Manager of Peter Herd of Wilmslow (the 2002 winner of the British Sandwich Association's Baker Sandwich Maker Award), Linda Collister, an author and expert on bread, and Jane Milton, a food consultant and writer with expertise in sandwiches and sandwich fillings.

They tasted three sandwiches from each of 12 retailers. We chose chicken, cheese and tuna sandwiches, opting for chicken salad, cheese ploughmans and tuna and sweetcorn where they were available.

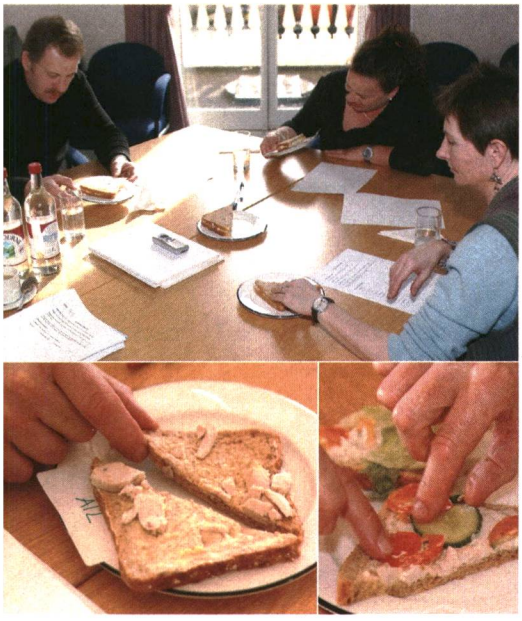
All the sandwiches were from the shop's standard ranges. We bought two of each and tasted them on the same day.

The experts assessed each sandwich for the quality and freshness of all the ingredients, the quantity of bread and filling, and the overall appearance, taste and texture.

Our league tables for each type of sandwich show the overall marks out of ten awarded to each sandwich, and the experts' opinions and comments.

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN TRENHOLM

LOSERS



pink chicken, which – although it had been properly cooked – really turned our experts' stomachs.

Sometimes, there just wasn't enough meat. Asda's chicken was reasonably good quality, but there wasn't much of it. Greggs' chicken sandwich also contained little meat and one expert felt 'you could call it a salad sandwich'. Coffee Republic's chicken sandwich – the most expensive we tried – was 'front filled', with the filling not evenly spread to the edges, making it look fuller than it really was.

Tuna on test The experts liked the quality and texture of the tuna in the Tesco sandwich. But the fish in Marks & Spencer's sandwich was 'strong', 'dark' and 'coarse', making it taste unpleasant. And Costa's tuna was so tasteless, it was dubbed 'tuna for people who don't like tuna.'

Lots of the tuna in the sandwiches our experts tasted was 'over-tumbled' – so mashed up, it looked like paste. The Asda tuna filling was 'sloppy – like pâté', Somerfield's was 'mushy', the tuna from Sainsbury's was 'gluey' and stuck to the bread, and Starbucks' was also mashed.

Limp, brown lettuce, flabby, shrivelled cucumber and tired salad were common problems

Bland bread Our tasters were hoping for springy, fresh bread with a good crust and flavour. The Asda chicken, Waitrose tuna, and Sainsbury's cheese sandwiches were good examples. Generally, though, the bread was flavourless and bland. Our baker was disappointed that there wasn't more variety, and thought most of the bread was chosen for shelf life rather than flavour.

It was also hard to find bread that wasn't too wet or too dry, even though the sandwiches were tasted on the day we bought them. The bread in the Starbucks chicken sandwich was 'almost like toast on one side', and a corner of Asda's cheese sandwich was 'like a rock'. Tesco's chicken sandwich, and the cheese sandwiches from Starbucks, Boots and Tesco, tasted stale, too. Meanwhile, the bread in the Waitrose cheese and Somerfield tuna sandwiches was wet and mushy.

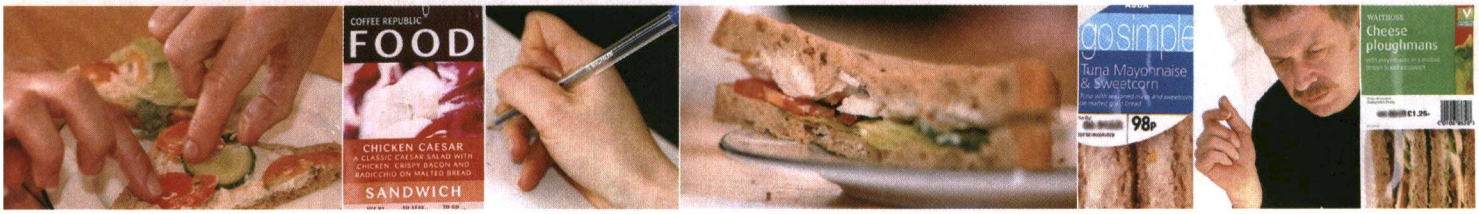
Soggy salad It wasn't just the main ingredients that disappointed. All three sandwiches from Pret A Manger, Somerfield and Starbucks were let down by their salads. Limp and brown lettuce, flabby, shrivelled cucumber and tired salad were common problems. Fortunately, some shops got it right. Coffee Republic's cheese and tuna sandwiches provided 'bouncy lettuce' and 'crunchy, fresh salad'.

Recipes for disaster The pricier sandwiches sometimes tried too hard to ▷

CHEESE SANDWICHES

MARKS OUT OF TEN		
7	**Greggs** Cheese Salad **£1.50**	Nice flavour, crunchy texture, reasonable mature cheddar, but tired salad
6	**Coffee Republic** Cheddar Ploughmans[1] **£2.80** 25.6g fat, 537 kcal	Mature cheddar and fresh salad, but bread dry and too much onion
5	**Pret A Manger** Double Cheddar **£2.25**	Generous filling. Mild cheese, lots of pepper, overloaded with mayo
5	**Sainsbury's** Mixed Cheese & Spring Onion **£1.10** 36.2g fat, 579 kcal	Well filled and fresh, but rich, fatty and salty with no contrasting textures
4	**Costa** Cheese Ploughmans **£2.35** 33.9g fat, 599 kcal	Bread OK. Sour, rubbery cheese, and a skimpy filling dominated by pickle
4	**Marks & Spencer** Cheddar Cheese Ploughmans[2] **£1.30** 23.9g fat, 455 kcal	Dry bread, bland cheese and pickle, flavour dominated by onion
3	**Somerfield** Cheese & Tomato **£1.29**	Bread nice and thick but bland, fatty filling with lots of mayonnaise
3	**Starbucks** Mature Cheddar Ploughmans **£2.40** 28.7g fat, 584 kcal	Slimy with ill-thought out flavour combinations and musty taste
2	**Asda** Go Simple Cheese & Coleslaw **£1.18** 24g fat, 436 kcal	Well filled but hard bread, waxy margarine, mild cheese and no crunch
2	**Tesco** Cheddar Cheese Pickle Ploughmans **£1.29** 27.6g fat, 620 kcal	Greasy, mild, plasticky cheese, lots of mayo, not enough pickle, limp lettuce
2	**Waitrose** Cheese Ploughmans **£1.25** 22.3g fat, 426 kcal	Flavours not balanced, no texture or crunch, lettuce stuck to wet bread
1	**Boots** Simply Cheese Ploughmans[3] **£1.90** 39g fat, 639 kcal	Stale bread, unpleasant cheese, brown lettuce, too much oily mayonnaise

1 Fat content has been reduced 2 Mayonnaise recipe has changed 3 Has been discontinued and replaced with similar recipe



CHICKEN SANDWICHES

MARKS OUT OF TEN

7 — **Waitrose Chicken Salad £1.70** 19.7g fat, 405 kcal
Reasonable quality chicken, fresh ingredients, well filled but a bit bland

5 — **Asda Go Simple Chicken & Sweetcorn[1] £1.48** 26g fat, 506 kcal
Fresh bread, but not enough chicken, bland, and not much texture

5 — **Somerfield Chicken Salad £1.79**
Nice chicken, balanced flavours, but thin bread and not enough salad

5 — **Tesco Chicken Salad £1.89** 21.5g fat, 453 kcal
Good chicken, crisp salad, well filled, but bread was dry and tasted stale

4 — **Boots Simply Roast Chicken Salad[2] £1.80** 21g fat, 433 kcal
Nice texture, with lots of chicken, but soggy bread and a strange aftertaste

4 — **Pret A Manger Chicken Caesar £2.45**
Unpleasant, overcomplicated combination of flavours. Not much chicken

4 — **Starbucks Chicken with Green Pesto £2.65** 13.4g fat, 399 kcal
Good chicken but dry bread, and overwhelmed by pepper and pesto

3 — **Coffee Republic Chicken Caesar[3] £2.80** 29.3g fat, 518 kcal
Skimpy filling, poor quality chicken, little texture, and synthetic taste

2 — **Greggs Chicken Salad £1.70**
Crisp salad but chicken flavour overwhelmed by mayonnaise. Very bland

1 — **Costa Roast Chicken Salad £2.55** 20.9g fat, 465 kcal
Tasteless bread, front filled with plastic tasting chicken and oily mayonnaise

1 — **Marks & Spencer Chicken Salad[4] £1.70** 23.8g fat, 450 kcal
Dry bread, pink chicken, lots of mayo and lettuce. Unpleasant and bland

1 — **Sainsbury's Just Chicken £1.50** 14.1g fat, 377 kcal
Onion and sausage taste. Dry bread and lots of congealed margarine

1 Bread and mayonnaise have been upgraded 2 Packaging has changed 3 Fat content has been reduced 4 Mayonnaise recipe has changed

TUNA SANDWICHES

MARKS OUT OF TEN

7 — **Tesco Tuna & Sweetcorn £1.49** 30.5g fat, 548 kcal
Good quality tuna, reasonable quality bread, and not too much mayo

6 — **Coffee Republic Tuna Salad[1] £2.60** 21.4g fat, 429 kcal
Fresh, good texture, with reasonable bread. Thin bread and too little tuna

5 — **Costa Tuna & Sweetcorn[2] £2.55** 24.6g fat, 512 kcal
Good bread but bland taste, skimpy filling, limp lettuce, and too much mayo

5 — **Pret A Manger Tuna Mayonnaise £1.95**
Good proportion of tuna to mayo but tuna over-mashed and salad tired

5 — **Waitrose Tuna & Cucumber £1.30** 20.2g fat, 412 kcal
Nice bread and good proportion of tuna. Peppery taste and limp cucumber

4 — **Greggs Tuna & Sweetcorn £1.45**
Lightweight. Sharp flavour with strong aftertaste, and lots of sweetcorn

2 — **Asda Go Simple Tuna Mayonnaise & Sweetcorn 98p** 22g fat, 450 kcal
Sloppy, with very soft bread, not much sweetcorn and too much mayo

2 — **Boots Simply Tuna & Sweetcorn[3] £1.40** 25g fat, 485 kcal
Good proportions but tuna flavourless and bread wet and bitter tasting

2 — **Sainsbury's Tuna & Sweetcorn £1.30** 21.4g fat, 440 kcal
Gluey texture, with sticky, mashed tuna. Strange tasting bread

2 — **Somerfield Tuna Mayonnaise £1.29**
Soggy bread, with thin, limp cucumber, dark tuna, and too much mayo

2 — **Starbucks Tuna Mayo with Spring Onions £2.40** 8.4g fat, 319 kcal
No texture, with wet bread, limp salad, and tuna mashed like pâté

1 — **Marks & Spencer Tuna & Sweetcorn[4] £1.40** 46.8g fat, 690 kcal
Unpleasant combination. Wet bread, strong, dark tuna, and too much mayo

1 Fat content has been reduced 2 Replaced by Tuna and Sweetcorn 3 Packaging has changed 4 Mayonnaise recipe has changed

impress. They tended to include a greater number of ingredients, with fancy sounding combinations, but our experts felt the flavours didn't always go together well.

They felt the chicken sandwiches from Coffee Republic and Pret A Manger had odd, overcomplicated flavour combinations, and both the chicken and cheese sandwiches from Starbucks were 'ill-thought through' and 'slapped together'. The Starbucks chicken sandwich was fine if you like pesto and pepper, but not so good if you wanted to taste the chicken. And the banana chutney in its cheese sandwich was 'slimy', 'musty' and 'foul'.

The banana chutney in the Starbucks sandwich was 'slimy', 'musty' and 'foul', and didn't go well with the cheese

The cheaper sandwiches weren't as adventurous with their ingredients, but our experts felt many of the cheese and tuna sandwiches overdid the mayonnaise.

NUTRITIONAL CONTENT

Many sandwiches were a disappointment on the taste front, but can they at least provide a healthy lunch? Most of us eat too much saturated fat and not enough fibre, but only Boots, Marks & Spencer, Tesco, Somerfield and Waitrose provide details of these elements on all their sandwiches. Most of the others give the calories and total fat content. We've listed this information in our tables, where it's available.

There are huge differences in the fat content of the sandwiches. If you want a tuna sandwich, for example, you can choose one from Starbucks, with just 8.4g of fat, or Marks & Spencer's version, which contains 46.8g. Calorie content varies widely too, from 319 to 690 for the above two sandwiches. Marks & Spencer's tuna sandwich is probably best avoided: not only is it top of the fat league, it's also bottom of the taste table. Another high-fat, low-taste option is Boots' cheese ploughmans.

The good news is that some of our experts' favourites, including the Waitrose chicken and Coffee Republic tuna, were lower in fat and calories than most of the other, less tasty, sandwiches they tried.

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David Evans looks at why so many child car seats aren't doing their job properly

Choosing any product related to your kids' safety is always slightly nerve-wracking. But with car seats, you really do have to choose very carefully – in a test of 20 car seats, we found only a few that we're prepared to recommend. The other seats we looked at simply wouldn't provide the protection needed in a severe crash.

STANDARD ISSUE

It's a danger we've been warning about for years. So how are all these seats managing to get into the shops if they're so poor? There is a specific European safety standard which all seats must meet before they're put on sale. The trouble is, this standard is inadequate, largely because it just isn't representative of what happens in the most serious crashes.

In the standard test, the child seat is attached to a sled, a crash test dummy is strapped in, and the sled is moved at high speed down a track. Then it is rapidly slowed to simulate a crash. However, we know from our experience of crash testing cars that the standard doesn't replicate the violence of a severe crash. In fact, the rate of deceleration in serious crashes can be up to 77 per cent higher than it is in the standard.

And there's a glaring omission in the European safety standard – it tests the seats in front-impact conditions only. There's no requirement on manufacturers to design seats that protect a child if another car piles into the side of yours. We tested seats for both front and side impacts, replicating the forces which we use in our car crash test – the European New Car Assessment Programme (EuroNCAP). These accurately reflect what happens in an extreme crash. We use such severe conditions to find the seats which save lives in the worst situations – and also because the seats that save lives in extreme conditions are more likely to reduce the level of injury in less punishing crashes.

To make the conditions of our crash test realistic, we placed the child seat on a real car seat inside a car body, rather than simply attaching it to a sled. We carefully filmed and measured all our crash tests, and analysed a host of factors. For example, we examined how forcefully the dummies' heads were thrown forward, and how much their necks twisted during the crash. We also looked at whether the dummy made contact with the car and whether it slipped out of the harness.

The forces in a severe crash can be 77 per cent higher than those in standard safety tests

The results we were left with highlighted weaknesses that would never show up in the standard tests which are used to certify a seat as safe for sale.

Most child car seats provide inadequate protection from crashes

CAR SEATS ARE STILL

Crash results You can see the results of our tests in the table on p37. Most seats did poorly, but there are four seats in particular which you should avoid – the Chicco Zenith, the Meggy Kombi, the Mothercare Dimension, and the Mothercare Runner. The Meggy Kombi is on sale in Argos simply labelled Kombi. A child in any of these four seats is likely to be seriously injured in a front-impact crash like the ones we simulated.

The Chicco Zenith model we tested suffered from a serious design flaw. It has two separate harness connectors which must be fastened next to each other inside a buckle. When you push them into the buckle, it makes a reassuring 'click'. However, even if one of the connectors isn't properly engaged, you still hear the click. This gives the impression that the child is safe, but there's no guarantee that both harness connectors are secure. In the event of an accident, a child could be completely unrestrained. The seat we tested wasn't bought in the UK (our tests were carried out in Germany) and Chicco claims it hasn't sold any seats with that buckle design in the UK.

POPULAR MISUSE

If car seats aren't providing enough protection in our crash tests – when they're installed by leading safety experts – in the real world, things could be worse still. Several surveys have demonstrated that most people don't fit their child seats in their cars properly.

BEST BUYS

Using any child seat is better than using none at all. However, some seats are much worse than others. For example, the less expensive seats we looked at – around the £20 mark – tended to do poorly in our crash tests. The safest seats we found were around £80 to £90.

Thankfully, the standard of seats is getting better. That means we're no longer recommending seats which were previously Best Buys. If you have an old Best Buy, upgrade to one of the new ones.

For children up to 13kg (from birth to around 18 months), the best seat on test was the **Bébé Confort Elios Safe Side £79** from John Lewis. It received relatively good marks in our crash safety tests. However, given that it was the safest in its class when properly installed, it's a shame that it was one of the most difficult to use. In particular, there was a fairly high potential for incorrect installation and use of the seat – so follow the instructions carefully. The runner up in this category was the **Graco Autobaby with base £90** from Halfords. It scored acceptably for safety but it wasn't as safe as the Bébé seat. It was recently modified and there may still be some old stock in the shops.

For children from 9kg up to 18kg or 36kg (from about nine months to about four or 11 years old), our favourite was the **Maxi Cosi Priori XP £120** from John Lewis. It's not perfect but it is the safest in its category, and it did well for ease of use.

For children between 15kg and 36kg (from about four years old), our Best Buy is the **Britax Kid £80** from Mothercare. It scored relatively well for safety. However, it uses the car's safety belt to secure the child, rather than a built-in harness, so it can't be firmly connected to the vehicle. The runner-up in this category was the **Bébé Confort Hipsos Safe Side £85** from John Lewis. It received adequate scores for safety. However, it's less safe, less comfortable for kids and more difficult to use than the Britax Kid.

The Bébé, Britax and Maxi Cosi seats all have hand-wash-only covers.

▷

FAILING CHILDREN

One survey – carried out for a seat manufacturer – suggests that as many as 75 per cent of people fit child seats incorrectly. That's important because even a good seat, if it isn't properly installed, could offer little protection in a crash.

So we tested each seat to see how easy it was to use. With the seats designed for children from birth to about 18 months, a panel of users installed each seat and strapped a crash test dummy into it. For the other seats, they strapped in a real child. They did this in four cars – a supermini, a hatchback, a luxury saloon and

CHOOSING AND USING

BEFORE YOU START

- Child seats are split into five different weight categories: 0, 0+, 1, 2 and 3. Check the weight of your child and use the table below to work out which category is most suitable for them.
- **Make a list of the cars in which you might have to use the child seat – for example, grandparents' or friends'.**
- Think whether you'll need to use the seat with a lap belt – for example, in the centre of the rear seat. Not all seats are designed for this. Generally, it is better to use a standard three-point seat belt.

IN THE SHOP

- **Take your child and car with you to the retailer. It's always helpful to have a chance to try the seat for real before you buy.**

Weight range	Approximate age range	Group stage/ type of seat
Birth to 10kg	Newborn to nine months	0 / Rearward facing
Birth to 13kg	Newborn to 18 months	0+ / Rearward facing
9kg to 18kg	Nine months to four years	1 / Forward facing
15kg to 25kg	Up to six years	2 / Booster seat
22kg to 36 kg	Up to 11 years	3 / Booster seat

- Ask for a child seat suitable for your child. The dealer should offer several different models from which to choose.
- **Ask the dealer to explain the advantages and disadvantages of each seat. For example, you may want a seat that converts to a booster for when your child grows. Not all models offer this.**
- Ask the dealer to check the seat against your list of cars. If they don't know which cars it fits, this information is often available on the packaging.
- **If there is a test car seat in the store, ask the dealer to demonstrate installation. It's also a good idea to try it out yourself with your child. However, this is no real alternative to trying the seat with your own car.**

IN YOUR CAR

- Ask whether you can try the seat in your car.
- **Check that the seat belt in your car is long enough to secure the seat.**
- Check that you can feed the seat belt through the slits in the seat without any obstructions.
- **Check that the shape of the child seat fits neatly with the shape of the car seat.**
- Place your child in the seat and try to strap them in securely. Check that the harness can be secured and adjusted easily.
- **Check that the seat leaves enough space for your child's legs to stretch out comfortably.**
- Some seats are larger than others. Check that the seat you've chosen leaves enough space for other passengers and car seats in the car.
- **Bear in mind the other people who will be using your seat – for example, grandparents. If there's anything awkward about fitting the seat, will they be able to install it correctly?**

INSTALLATION ADVICE

- Never fit a seat in front of an active front airbag. If it goes off, it could endanger your child. This applies not only to rearward-facing seats, but also to forward-facing ones.
- **Make sure that you follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully. It's a good idea to store the instruction manual in the car.**
- Be careful not to push the seat too hard into the car – for example, by pushing it down with your knee. This could damage the seat.
- **The seat should sit firmly on your car seat, with little forward or sideways movement. When you open the buckle of the adult belt, a correctly installed seat should spring upward slightly.**
- Never try to modify a seat yourself – for example, by adding extra padding.

an MPV. Our experts observed the whole process and considered 40 separate factors, such as how easy the belts were to buckle. They also evaluated the clarity and prominence of the seats' instructions and labels.

Some of the seats in our test were much easier than others to install incorrectly, without realising it. Even though the users had the manufacturers' instructions in front of them, they still struggled to fit many of the child seats properly. This kind of issue becomes an especially big concern if you have to rely on other people – grandparents or carers, for example – to install and use them in their own cars.

A possible solution The difficulty of installing seats is complicated by the fact that many seats fit only particular cars, and many car manufacturers approve only specific seats. The latest system, ISOfix, has been developed to create one, standard way to fit seats which could be used by all manufacturers.

The idea behind the ISOfix system is that car manufacturers build mounts into the seats of their cars. The seat manufacturers can then design their seats so that they simply click into place in the car.

Experts predict that ISOfix will be safer than normal seats, as well as easier to fit. But there's little hard evidence of this so far, because so few ISOfix seats are available. Both car and seat manufacturers have been slow to support ISOfix. In fact, some car manufacturers are making a mess of implementing it. In the worst cases, the mounting bars are actually hidden from view, poorly labelled and difficult to access.

IMPROVING STANDARDS

Current standards aren't as strong as they should be, but they're still a big improvement on a few years ago. If you need to hire a car seat, make sure it meets the current standard (ECE44-03). Our recent investigation ('Danger: hired child seats', April 2003, p42) found that many car hire companies were renting out-of-date seats. Likewise, if you're dragging an old car seat down from the attic for a new family member, check it isn't out of date. If it was made before 1998 and doesn't have a label saying that it meets ECE44-03, buy a new one. In any event, it might be safest to replace it with one of our new Best Buys seats.

Follow our buying advice, and you should steer clear of the worst seats. However, for the car seat industry itself, there's still a long way to go. We're pressing for changes to make the minimum safety standard more demanding. And we're working together with consumer groups across Europe and car clubs, such as the AA, to guide people towards the safest seats. Over the years, we've successfully influenced the development of car safety through a similar approach, with EuroNCAP crash tests. Our aim now is to transform the safety of child car seats in the same way.

PRICE CHECK

The prices we give in our Best Buy Guides and in *Which?* tables are the cheapest we found in a survey of high-street retailers.

CHILD CAR SEATS

	SPECIFICATION							PERFORMANCE				EASE OF USE						
	Price (£)	Weight group ▷1	Weight category ▷1	Weight of seat (kg)	Integral harness	Travel system ▷2	Booster ▷3	Comfort of child	Front crash ▷4	Side crash	Overall safety ▷4	Fitting in car	Belt routing	Buckling up	Daily use ▷5	Instructions	Incorrect use ▷6	Total test score (%) ▷4
CHILDREN FROM 0kg																		
Bébé Confort Elios Safe Side	79	0-13kg	0+	3	✓	✓		☆	☆	○	☆	○	○	○	○	○	○	56
Bébé Confort Iseos Safe Side	109	0-18kg	0+,1	8.9	✓			☆	◒	☆	○	○	○	☆	○	○	○	52
Brevi Smart Silverline	*60*	0-13kg	0+	3.4	✓			☆	☆	◒	○	○	☆	☆	○	☆	☆	51
Britax Rock-a-Tot Deluxe	79	0-13kg	0+	3.1	✓	✓		☆	○	◒	○	○	☆	○	☆	○	☆	49
Graco Autobaby with base[1]	90	0-13kg	0+	7.2	✓	✓		☆	☆	○	○	○	○	☆	☆	☆	○	52
Mamas & Papas Primo Viaggio	99	0-13kg	0+	5.6	✓	✓		☆	○	◒	○	○	○	☆	○	☆	☆	51
CHILDREN FROM 9kg																		
Britax Cruiser plus	*55*	9-25kg	1,2	1.7				☆	◒	○	◒	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	★	37
Britax Eclipse	89	9-18kg	1	7.2	✓			☆	◒	☆	○	○	○	☆	○	☆	☆	48
Britax Ranger	44	9-36kg	1,2,3	2			✓	○	○	◒	◒	★	○	●	☆	☆	☆	32
Britax Renaissance	135	9-18kg	1	11	✓			☆	◒	☆	○	○	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	54
Britax Trio	89	9-36kg	1,2,3	5.6	✓		✓	☆	◒	◒	◒	○	○	●	☆	☆	○	23
Chicco Zenith	119	9-18kg	1	7.7	✓			☆	●	☆	●	☆	☆	○	○	○	●	10
Maxi Cosi Priori SPS	99	9-18kg	1	6.9	✓			☆	◒	☆	○	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	59
Maxi Cosi Priori XP	*120*	9-18kg	1	9.1	✓			☆	◒	☆	○	☆	★	☆	☆	☆	☆	58
Meggy Kombi	18	9-36kg	1,2,3	1			✓	☆	●	◒	●	★	◒	●	☆	☆	☆	10
Mothercare Runner	65	9-36kg	1,2,3	4.9	✓		✓	☆	●	○	●	○	◒	●	○	☆	○	10
CHILDREN FROM 15kg																		
Bébé Confort Hipsos Safe Side	85	15-36kg	2,3	4.3			✓	☆	○	○	○	☆	○	☆	☆	☆	☆	51
Britax Kid	80	15-36kg	2,3	5.8				★	○	☆	☆	☆	★	★	☆	★	★	68
Mamas & Papas Passaggio	*18*	15-36kg	2,3	1.1			✓	○	◒	◒	◒	☆	◒	●	☆	☆	★	26
Mothercare Dimension	20	15-36kg	2,3	3.1			✓	☆	●	○	●	☆	◒	●	☆	☆	★	10

1 This seat has been modified quite recently and there may still be some old stock in the shops

NOTES

Models highlighted in orange are featured in the Best Buy Guide on p35. Prices in *italics* are manufacturers' guide prices.

Specification

1 See 'Choosing and using', p36.
2 Can be removed from the car and placed in a travel system, such as a pram or carrycot.
3 A booster seat or a seat which can convert into a booster seat. These raise the child so they can use an adult seat belt.

Performance

4 If a seat did badly in the front crash tests, we limited its scores so it couldn't score highly for 'overall safety' or 'total test score'.

Ease of use

5 Assessment of how easy the cover of the seat is to clean and refit. Also includes a rating for how easy the seat is to handle.
6 Indicates the potential for incorrect or inappropriate installation and use.

KEY

★ ☆ ○ ◒ ●

best ⟷ worst

✓ has this feature

TOTAL TEST SCORE

This ignores price and is based on:

Safety	60%
Ease of use	40%

SNAIL'S PACE

Banks are making millions of pounds each year by failing to speed up the time it takes to transfer money between accounts

Banking by phone and on the internet has made life much easier. We can pay bills and transfer money without leaving the house or even getting out of bed. But, although it now takes just seconds to request a payment to another account, it still takes days for the money to reach its destination.

Whether it's a standing order to your credit card company, a one-off transfer to your offspring stranded at the other side of the world, or even a payment to yourself when you're juggling funds between accounts, why can't the transfer go through at the click of a button?

The answer's simple. Banks use a slow, outdated system to transfer money, and it's not in their interests to modernise it. When you ask your bank to transfer funds, the money normally leaves your account that day. But your bank generally holds on to it for at least two days, earning interest. See 'The vanishing money trick', below, for an explanation of what happens.

Banks are making increasing amounts of money from electronic transfers, as the chequebook becomes a thing of the past. Last year, we transferred around £50 billion by phone or internet – an increase of 20 per cent on the previous year.

THE VANISHING MONEY TRICK

When you transfer money electronically – via a phone or internet banking service, or by standing order – the money generally leaves your account that day. Here's what happens to it before it finally reaches its destination, assuming you instruct your bank to make a payment from your account on a Monday.

DAY ONE – MONDAY
You request the transfer. Your bank should pass details of the transfer to Bacs (the banks' clearing system) by the end of the day. It will move the money out of your account and into its suspense account.

↓

DAY TWO – TUESDAY
Your bank holds on to your money and earns interest on it. Bacs processes the transfer and passes the details to the recipient's bank.

↓

DAY THREE – WEDNESDAY
Your bank transfers the money from its suspense account to the recipient's bank. The recipient can withdraw the money today. If transfers arrive later than the third day, your bank has probably delayed passing details to Bacs until day two or even day three.

TRANSFER TIMES ON TEST

The banks' systems mean a transfer to another bank will always take until at least the third day. But some banks hold on to your money for an extra day, boosting their profits even further.

We put 18 top banks and building societies to the test, using their phone and internet banking services to request a total of 561 transfers between different accounts. All the transfers were requested during working hours between January and March this year. Here's what we found.

If you're waiting for the money If somebody's transferred money to your account, or paid you by standing order, it can be frustrating not to know when the money will turn up. We found most transfers arrived on the third day (see 'Transfer times from each bank', opposite). But more than a third didn't get there until the fourth, or even the fifth, day.

Each bank's transfer times were fairly consistent. For example, money sent from NatWest accounts always arrived on the third day, whether it was being sent to an Abbey National, Barclays, or Woolwich account. But if you're expecting money from Alliance & Leicester, Cahoot, Co-op, Halifax, IF, Lloyds TSB, Nationwide, or Woolwich, you should be prepared to wait, no matter who you bank with.

Transfers between banks in the same group – such as between HSBC and First Direct, and Co-op and Smile – generally took place sooner, often on the day the request was made.

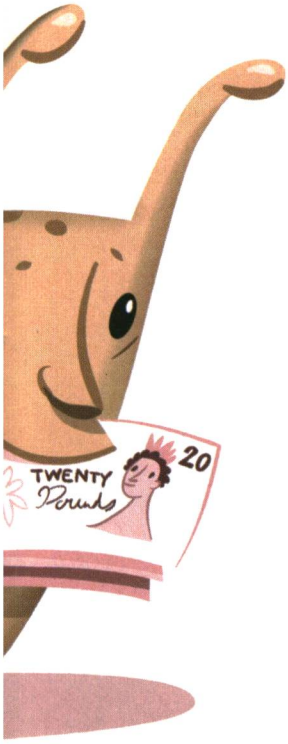
If you've made the transfer If you're transferring money to another person's

ILLUSTRATION BEN KIRCHNER

How long it takes to transfer money

Banks are holding on to your cash

Why the system is so slow



account, the money will normally leave your account on day one, no matter how long it then takes to arrive.

Phone or internet? Don't expect the high-tech world of internet banking to make transfers any quicker. For most banks in our investigation, phone and online transfers took the same length of time.

Strangely, with The Co-operative Bank and Alliance & Leicester, we found it was quicker to use the phone than the internet. Alliance & Leicester's online transfers all arrived on the fifth day – a day longer than those requested by phone. The transfers we made via the Co-op's internet site were also slow. Most arrived on either the fourth or fifth day, while all the Co-op's telephone transfers, and all Smile transfers, reached their destination by the third day.

TRANSFER TIMES FROM EACH BANK

THE DAY THE MONEY TRANSFERS IN OUR SURVEY ARRIVED

	ONLINE		PHONE
DAY 3	Abbey National Bank of Scotland Barclays Clydesdale First Direct[1] HSBC[1] NatWest The Royal Bank of Scotland Smile[2] Yorkshire Bank	DAY 3	Abbey National Bank of Scotland Barclays Clydesdale The Co-operative Bank[2] First Direct[1] HSBC[1] NatWest The Royal Bank of Scotland Smile[2] Yorkshire Bank
DAY 4	Cahoot[3,4] The Co-operative Bank[5] Halifax IF Lloyds TSB[6] Nationwide[6] Woolwich	DAY 4	Alliance & Leicester Halifax IF Woolwich
DAY 5	Alliance & Leicester		

NOTES
1 Transfers between First Direct and HSBC happened on same day
2 Most transfers between The Co-operative Bank and Smile took place on same day
3 Didn't allow telephone transfers
4 Cahoot to Abbey National
5 Most transfers arrived on fourth day. Some arrived on fifth day
6 Unable to set up phone banking

THE BANKS' EXCUSES

Alliance & Leicester, the slowest bank in our investigation, told us that 'only if the request comes in after 8pm does it take five days'. However, we made all 17 online transfer requests with Alliance & Leicester before 3.30pm, and not one reached its destination before the fifth day.

The Co-op told us that all its online transfers should arrive on the third day, unless they're set up as standing orders, in which case they would take an extra day to arrive. It couldn't explain why some transfers didn't reach the recipient until day five.

Alliance & Leicester did admit that 'the vast majority of transfers made by phone or internet take four days'. So why is it slower than other banks? It told us it's because it monitors transactions before forwarding details to Bacs (the banks' clearing house) to make sure there's enough money in customers' accounts. In fact, these checks should happen automatically as part of the transfer process, and certainly shouldn't take a whole day.

Future improvements? Half the banks in our investigation told us they would like to see electronic transfers speeded up. However, none of them has done anything to improve the system, despite promises three years ago to make things quicker.

PHONE BANKING PROBLEMS

Banks would like us to believe that they spend a great deal of time and money on customer services such as telephone banking. Despite this, the Nationwide and Lloyds TSB customers in our survey had great problems setting up phone banking facilities. They tried for several weeks, making numerous phone calls to the banks, but it proved too difficult. In the end, we weren't able to include these companies in our investigation.

SAME-DAY TRANSFERS

If you can't wait a few days to transfer money, it is possible to do it on the same day, but only if you're prepared to pay.

Banks typically charge around £20 for a same-day transfer (via a system known as Chaps). Alliance & Leicester and Woolwich charge the most, at £25 for each Chaps payment. Most banks will also let you clear a cheque on the day it's paid in – ▷

THE CHEQUE'S IN THE POST

So what happens when you write a cheque? Follow this example, where Pete writes you a cheque for £100 that you pay into your bank on Monday morning.

DAY ONE – MONDAY

At the end of Monday, your bank sends the cheque to its clearing centre. The cheque information is then processed and the details are sent electronically to the clearing centre at Pete's bank.

DAY TWO – TUESDAY

The paper cheque itself is sent by courier from your bank's clearing centre to a central exchange where it's physically handed over to Pete's bank.

DAY THREE – WEDNESDAY

Pete's bank checks whether there is enough money in Pete's account. If there is, it simultaneously pays the £100 into your account and debits Pete's account.
Your bank probably won't let you withdraw the money yet but it will probably 'clear it for value'. This means that you'll start to earn interest on it.
If there isn't enough money in Pete's account, his bank will bounce the cheque – by sending the cheque to your bank by first-class post, so it arrives on day four, Thursday.

DAY FOUR – THURSDAY

Your bank will hear from Pete's bank only if the cheque has bounced. It hears nothing if the payment goes through. Most banks will let you withdraw your money today.

DAY FIVE – FRIDAY

The decision to bounce a cheque may be delayed, so your bank may not find out until day five. As a result, some banks won't let you withdraw your money until Friday.

for a price. They charge £10 to £15 for 'special presentation' of a cheque. If you're keen to make sure that your regular payments arrive on the day they leave your account, set up a direct debit. With direct debits, unlike standing orders or one-off transfers, the money reaches the recipient on the day it leaves your account.

PAYING BY CHEQUE

Transfers made electronically – by phone, internet, or standing order – might be slow, but they're often quicker than waiting for a cheque to clear. You won't normally start earning interest on any cheque you've paid in until at least day three, and your bank won't normally let you access the money until the fourth day (see 'The cheque's in the post', above, for a description of the lengthy cheque-clearing process).

The cheque-clearing process could be speeded up if banks dealt with bounced cheques more speedily and efficiently. Under the current system, they have to wait until day five to be absolutely sure a cheque isn't going to bounce, even though few cheques actually do. To make things quicker, they could use phone, fax or email, rather than post, to notify other banks when a cheque bounces.

Cheque mate The slow cheque-clearing system can sometimes have its advantages. With electronic transfers, there's at least a two-day delay between the money leaving your account and arriving at its destination. During this time, the banks are earning interest on your cash. When you pay by cheque, though, the money stays in your account until it's reached the recipient's account, so you carry on earning interest for longer. This could be useful if you're paying a non-urgent bill, for example.

WRITE BACK

If you have comments or questions about anything you've read in *Which?* this month, contact us at **writeback@which.net**. We publish answers to some of your questions in 'Write back', p4, and more online at **www.which.co.uk/whichextra**.

OUR VERDICT

We're disappointed that, since we last investigated cheques and electronic transfers in June 2000, nothing has been done to speed up the processes, despite promises from the banks.

The Cruickshank Report, commissioned by the government in 1998, concluded that electronic money transfers were too slow, and recommended that the government set up an independent payment systems regulator to address this issue. Unfortunately, this hasn't happened.

The government should act on the recommendations of its own report and force the banks to make improvements. If banks updated their systems, they could implement same-day transfers for all their customers, without making extra charges. Consumers shouldn't have to pay £20 or more for something that could be done at the touch of a button.

The banks should also develop a quicker way to send bounced cheques back, so they wouldn't end up denying customers access to money they've paid in.

We will continue to press for speedier payment systems, and will keep you informed of any changes. If you're unhappy with the time it takes to make payments then write with your concerns to Dept MN at our Hertford address (see p2).

Cheap enough to hand out by the dozen and easy to operate in a confused state of mind – disposable cameras make a great addition to parties and wedding receptions

Photo opportunities

We're all encouraged these days to spend our hard-earned dosh on technology to 'share the moment' – digital cameras, camcorders, those phones with the cameras built-in. It's expensive stuff if you'd rather spend your money on having a good time than recording it for posterity. But there is a cheaper option.

You can buy a dozen or so disposable cameras without breaking the bank and hand them out to party guests to record events from every angle – which explains why they're becoming popular at weddings. If there are kids at the party, you can pack them off to capture what goes on from their perspective without worrying about the camera being dropped or lost. You can even buy a hen-night pack complete with Ann Summers vouchers and 'L' plates, from one manufacturer's website, www.weddingcameras.co.uk (£20).

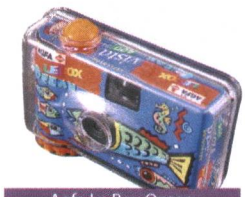
The downside, as so often in life, is that pang of guilt the morning after. But not all disposable cameras are thrown away when the film's finished. The Jazz cameras we tested were made from reused parts of old disposable cameras. Other brands aren't always as environmentally friendly. However, disposable cameras offer a handy solution where you wouldn't want to risk – or couldn't afford – a technologically superior alternative.

PICTURE QUALITY

That said, the picture quality isn't as good as you'd get with a compact camera, especially indoors. And, if you pick the wrong disposable camera, your guests could be taking pictures which make things look even more blurry than you remember them. We found one camera, Agfa's Le Box Ocean, which was so bad that we think it shouldn't be on sale at all.

We tested 20 single-use cameras to find out which take pictures that you won't have to throw away. We carried out a range of technical measurements on each and took around 2,000 photographs. Then we invited a panel of 40 amateur photographers to rate the pictures. And, for an expert's perspective, we consulted Mike Maloney, top Fleet Street photojournalist and award-winning photographer. Neither the panel nor Mike was told which cameras had taken which pictures.

We also included a set of pictures from the best autofocus camera in our recent test, the Minolta AF50 Bigfinder (see 'In the frame', December 2002, p26), to see exactly how it compared with the disposable cameras. At £40, it costs about ten times as much as the cheapest disposable cameras. You can see the results of our tests in the table on p43. Our Best Buy disposable cameras gave the compact camera a ▷

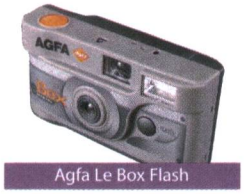

Agfa Le Box Ocean

Fujifilm Quicksnap Panorama

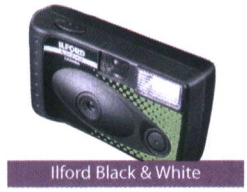
Fujifilm Quicksnap Marine

Fujifilm Quicksnap Superia Daylight

Kodak Ultra Compact


Agfa Le Box Flash

Fujifilm Quicksnap Superia Flash


Ilford Black & White

Jazz Wedding

Jazz Wow!

BEST BUYS

The best disposable camera on test was a flash model, the **Kodak Ultra Compact Flash £7.50** from Asda. It's currently being replaced by the Kodak High Definition Flash. We've had a look at the replacement camera and reckon that it's at least as good as its predecessor, with a more natural colour balance.

In fact, Kodak very nearly swept the board. The **Kodak Ultra 2 Formats APS** was the other high-scoring flash camera, though at **£11** from Boots, it was the most expensive on test. It was marked down for ease of use because it has a stiff wind-on mechanism. Only slightly less impressive was the **Kodak Ultra Sport £10** from Boots. It takes good pictures outdoors, though it doesn't have a flash – so it's not well suited to indoor shots – and its shutter-release button is difficult to use. However, don't assume that you can just plump for any Kodak model. We tested its Fun range, though we haven't included the results in our table because Kodak has made some changes to the cameras' workings. But we have had a quick look at their replacements and we were distinctly unimpressed by the non-flash Kodak Fun.

Our other Best Buy is the **Fujifilm Quicksnap Superia Daylight £6** from Jessops. It's a non-flash model but still took relatively good pictures under both sunny and overcast conditions.

Prices for single-use cameras vary between shops and change frequently, so we've selected our Best Buys on performance alone. However, if you're planning to buy in bulk for a special event, you could try the Tesco Value. At only £4, it could work out cheaper to buy a few of these than to buy the special multi-packs of other brands.

serious run for its money in sunny weather. But even the best disposable cameras we found couldn't match its picture quality in less ideal conditions.

THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

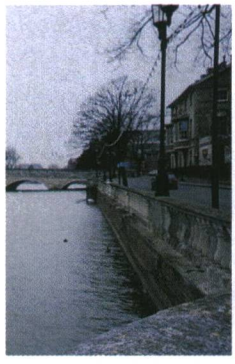
The ideal situation for using a single-use camera is outside in good sunlight. On sunny days, most cameras took decent-quality pictures, but many of them struggled when it was overcast. In dull weather, the photos were more prone to problems such as variations in colour (for example, some images looked too orange or too green) or lack of sharpness. See 'Throwaway remarks', below, for some examples.

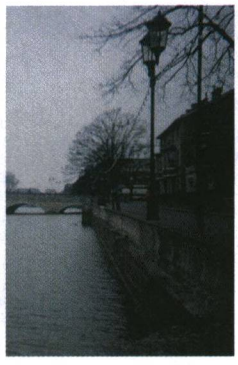
However, there are things you can look for if you plan to use the camera in less-than-ideal conditions. For example, disposable cameras usually have a film speed of either 400 or 800 ISO. This tells you how sensitive the film is to light – an 800 film is more sensitive than a 400 film. If you buy a single-use camera which doesn't have a flash, opt for one with an 800 film speed to improve your chances of taking good shots in dull weather.

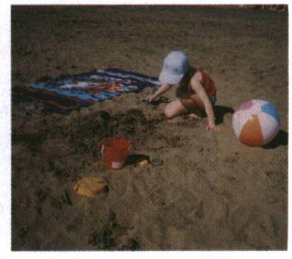
Despite their popularity at parties, disposable cameras aren't perfect for use indoors. To stand a chance of taking good pictures inside, you'll have to

THROWAWAY REMARKS

There are differences in sharpness, especially in low light. The picture on the left is sharper than the one on the right.



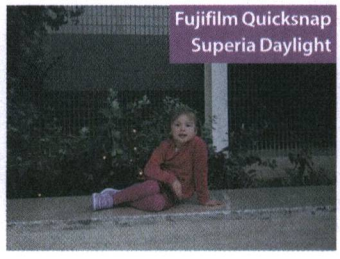




The picture on the left shows what this scene should look like. The others show common problems with photos from disposable cameras: unnatural tinge or colour bias, known as a cast (centre), and darkness around the edge of the photograph, known as vignetting (right)

Disposable cameras without a flash can struggle indoors, even in bright light. We took the photos below under a glass roof in bright sunshine. The two on the left were taken with cameras with no flash

Agfa Le Box Ocean


Fujifilm Quicksnap Superia Daylight

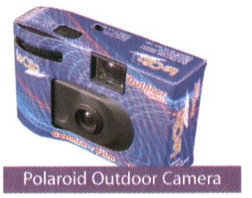
Kodak Ultra Compact Flash

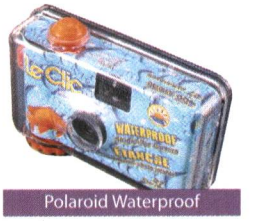
£40 compact camera

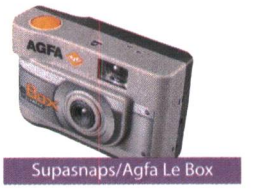
PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES DUNCAN, GETTYONE STONE

Kodak Ultra Sport

Konica Film-in Neo


Polaroid Outdoor Camera

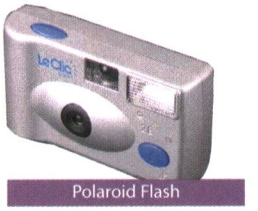

Polaroid Waterproof


Supasnaps/Agfa Le Box

Kodak Ultra 2 Formats APS

Kodak Ultra Compact Flash

Konica Film-in Neo Flash


Polaroid Flash

Tesco Value

buy a model with a built-in flash. Most of the flash models we tested took pictures indoors to a reasonable standard. If you're just after a cheap and cheerful record of a night out, they should capture the proceedings well enough to jog your memory. However, use a disposable camera without a flash, and even brightly lit indoor scenes won't be reproduced well. If you're after good-quality indoor prints, you'll need a compact camera – see 'Throwaway remarks', p42, for an example of the difference in quality.

The flashes on the cameras we tested were effective only within about two or three metres of the camera. If you're trying to focus on something further away than this, then using the flash won't help, and could result in a blur or fog across your photo.

FEATURES

Given that they're so cheap, it's impressive that some disposable cameras have special features which enable them to take panoramic shots or work underwater.

Panoramas Two of the cameras on test – the Kodak Ultra 2 Formats APS and the Fujifilm Quicksnap Panorama – could take panoramic shots. These are good for photographs of scenery or large groups of people. The Fujifilm is a few pounds cheaper, but the Kodak is much better value for money. The Fujifilm takes 15 shots, compared with 25 from the Kodak. And the Kodak has better picture quality. Another drawback of the Fujifilm is that it takes panoramic shots only, whereas the Kodak also lets you select a 7x4 format.

Underwater Several of the cameras claimed to be waterproof. We checked how well they held up underwater, and all survived without leaks. None had a flash, though, so whatever depth they claim to be waterproof to (the Kodak Ultra Sport states 10m), don't assume they'll take pictures at this depth. If you want to take pictures underwater, choose a sunny day and take them within 1m of the surface where it's more likely that there will be enough light.

Black and white If you're feeling a bit arty, you could try the Ilford Black & White camera. It did poorly in our technical tests but our professional photographer, Mike Maloney, thought its pictures were acceptable. However, they had none of the subtly different shades of grey you'd get from a good black and white film in a decent compact camera. In Mike's words: 'With this camera you've almost got only three tones – black, white and grey – with very little in-between.'

DISPOSABLE CAMERAS

	SPECIFICATION				RATINGS							
	Price (£) 1▷	Number of exposures	Film speed (ISO) 2▷	Waterproof	Flash recovery time (sec) 3▷	Sharpness of picture 4▷	Optical quality 5▷	Picture quality (sunny) 6▷	Picture quality (overcast) 6▷	Overall picture quality 6▷	Ease of use	Total test score (%)
CAMERAS WITHOUT FLASH												
Agfa Le Box Ocean	10	27	400	✓		◒	○	●	●	●	○	23
Fujifilm Quicksnap Panorama[1]	8	15	800			○	☆	☆	○	☆	☆	56
Fujifilm Quicksnap Marine	9	27	800	✓		○	☆	★	○	☆	☆	57
Fujifilm Quicksnap Superia Daylight	6	27	800			◒	○	★	☆	★	○	63
Kodak Ultra Compact[2]	6	27	400			☆	☆	★	○	☆	☆	59
Kodak Ultra Sport	10	27	800	✓		☆	☆	★	☆	★	◒	61
Konica Film-in Neo	6	27	400			◒	☆	☆	○	☆	☆	54
Polaroid Outdoor Camera	8	27	400			◒	☆	☆	○	☆	☆	52
Polaroid Waterproof	8	27	400	✓		◒	○	○	◒	○	○	39
Supasnaps/Agfa Le Box[3]	5	27	400			◒	○	☆	◒	○	○	44
CAMERAS WITH A FLASH												
Agfa Le Box Flash	4	27	400		5	◒	◒	○	◒	○	○	39
Fujifilm Quicksnap Superia Flash	5	27	800		5	○	☆	★	○	☆	○	55
Ilford Black & White	9	27	400		8	◒	◒	see[4]	see[4]	see[4]	☆	53
Jazz Wedding[5]	4	27	400		6	◒	○	☆	◒	○	○	42
Jazz Wow!	6[6]	27	400		12	☆	☆	☆	○	☆	○	49
Kodak Ultra 2 Formats APS	11	25	400		3	☆	★	★	☆	★	◒	62
Kodak Ultra Compact Flash[2]	7.50	27	800		5	☆	☆	★	☆	★	○	64
Konica Film-in Neo Flash	5	27	400		7	●	○	☆	○	☆	○	51
Polaroid Flash	9	27	400		11	○	○	○	○	○	○	45
Tesco Value	24	400			7	○	☆	★	○	☆	○	57
COMPACT CAMERA (REUSABLE)												
Minolta AF50 Bigfinder	40				7	☆	☆	☆	★	★	○	70

1 Produces panoramic shots only
2 The Kodak Ultra Compact models are being replaced by the Kodak High Definition range, so availability will be limited. The replacement cameras use 800 ISO film. We've checked the new High Definition Flash model and it seems to be at least as good as its predecessor
3 Carries either brand name, but camera is the same
4 Because this camera produces only black and white photos, we couldn't compare it directly with the rest. We found it took reasonably good photos, though they lacked subtle differences between shades
5 We tested the camera with a Perutz brand film, but it's also sometimes supplied with an Agfa film
6 Price includes free film processing

NOTES

Models highlighted in orange are in the Best Buy Guide, opposite.

Specification

1 This is the price you can expect to pay by shopping around.
2 This indicates the sensitivity of the film to light. The higher speed (800) films are more suitable for taking photos in low-light conditions.

Ratings

3 The number of seconds it takes for the flash to recover between shots.
4 A technical measure of the sharpness of the picture produced by the camera.
5 A technical measure of the quality of picture produced by each camera.
6 Based on a statistical analysis of the judgements of a panel of 40 keen amateur photographers.

KEY

★ ☆ ○ ◒ ●
best — worst
✓ has this feature

TOTAL TEST SCORE

This overall rating ignores price and is based on:

Picture quality	70 %
Technical tests	15 %
Ease of use	15 %

Your cars, your opinions

The adverts might promise a happier, more glamourous life along with your new car, but only the owners can tell you what it's really like to drive

You're in the showroom, trying to choose a car. Wouldn't it be good if you could pick the brains of existing owners, so you can see through the sales talk? We can help. Thanks to our readers, we have access to hundreds of honest opinions about new cars.

This month, we spoke to ten owners of each of five new cars. They'd all owned their car for three months or more, so were aware of all the annoying niggles and handy features. The new Honda, Mazda and Toyota models seem to be living up to their reputation for reliability, while the Vauxhall Vectra and Seat Ibiza are beset by faults.

As well as opinions, we've printed some facts about each car. The fuel consumption figures are for a combination of motorway and town driving. We've also listed information about the company car tax payable as a percentage of the car's value.

Next month, we'll bring you our security assessments of new cars. And look out for September's *Which? Car*, which will include owners' verdicts on 138 new models.

HONDA CR-V

According to the adverts, the new Honda CR-V is designed for adventurous souls who, in reality, spend most of their time negotiating a suburban jungle. In other words, although it's a 4x4, it doesn't pretend to be a proper off-roader – more a practical large car with high seats and substantial road presence.

This is certainly what the owners we spoke to wanted from their car. More than anything, they were looking for a reliable, practical and roomy car, and enjoyed the CR-V's extra seat height for improved visibility and ease of getting in and out.

RELIABILITY TO THE TEST

Our surveys show that Hondas are usually among the most reliable cars, so it's no surprise that this was the main reason that most owners chose the CR-V. John Bartham told us: 'I had a Land Rover Freelander before and I was looking for more reliability.' Four had bought the previous CR-V and liked it, and two others also had good previous experiences of owning a Honda.

'It's an urban 4x4... a practical car and a very good load carrier' Alan De Souza

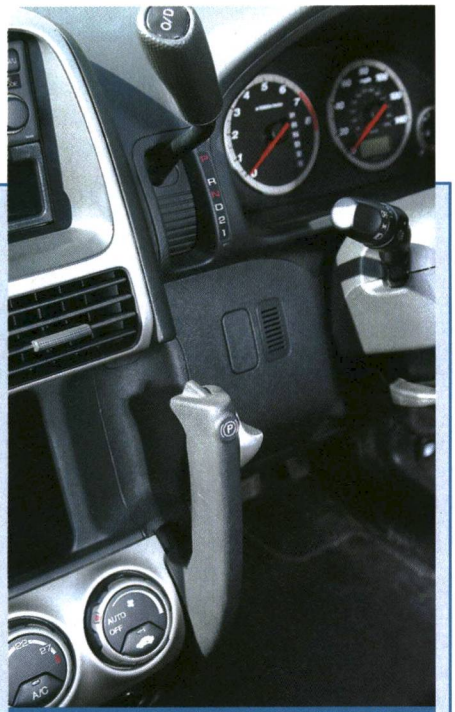
Despite this reputation, half the owners we spoke to reported some kind of problem, ranging from a rattling speaker and faulty instrument panel to 'explosive' air conditioning. Jeremy Burton explains what happened to him: 'Suddenly there was an awful noise and it sounded as if the car was about to explode.' A faulty valve had caused the car's air-conditioning cylinder to empty into the cabin in seconds. 'It looked like smoke inside the car,' Jeremy told us. Fortunately, the dealer managed to fix the problem to his satisfaction.

Jeremy also had problems with the handbrake design. As with other recent Honda models, the handbrake and gear lever are both mounted on the dash (see photograph, right). Most owners like this design feature, but Jeremy was unlucky. His handbrake became stuck on more than one occasion, once requiring an AA call-out to loosen it, before the dealer fixed it properly.

PRACTICAL BUT THIRSTY

On a more superficial level, owners had mixed feelings about the car's looks. Some liked the look of the exterior, some didn't, but most found it 'square' or 'boxy'. Many told us the inside of the car was unexciting and plasticky, but they agreed it was functional. John Adlam summed up the general feeling when he praised 'the flexible interior space, storage space and comfort.' The boot space, for example, 'has stacks of room for luggage, and flexible seating.'

So what's it like on the road? Owners felt the 2.0-litre engine offered reasonably good acceleration for the type of vehicle, and found it responsive to drive, with particularly good brakes. Several mentioned that it doesn't handle like the previous CR-V, or like a normal 4x4, due to its firmer suspension. As Derek Haslam pointed out: 'There is very little body roll compared with the old CR-V. I think the suspension is a little



Most owners liked the high gear stick and handbrake, but they weren't always reliable

stiffer and it's a slightly harsher ride.'Visibility to the front and side is good, but seven owners had problems with the limited rear view, caused partly by the back-seat head restraints.

Another weak point is the car's high fuel consumption. Honda claims the CR-V manages 31mpg, but the owners found it achieved an average of only 27mpg. Unusually for this type of car, there's no diesel version.

Overall, the owners we spoke to were happy with their purchase, and the pros outweighed any cons. David Fraser called the CR-V,'a good all-round car...built to do that little bit more.'

FACTS FROM WHICH? CAR

On-the-road price	£16,695 to £20,495
Size (l x w) including mirrors	4.53m x 2.05m
Engine sizes (litre)	2.0 (petrol only)
Fuel consumption (mpg)	31.0
Company car tax	27 per cent
CO_2 emissions	216
Brand reliability	best
Safety	not tested

PHOTOGRAPHY RICHARD MAILE, JOHN TRENHOLM

SEAT IBIZA

'Comfortable and easy to drive' Helen Langley

The latest version of the Ibiza appealed to owners searching for good looks, performance, comfort and reliability at a reasonable price. The Ibiza has to compete with a host of superminis, and most owners had shopped around before choosing it. Three people said the test drive made their minds up. Adrian Pinchess tried the Ford Fiesta, MG ZR and Renault Clio, too, but told us:'There was no comparison. As soon as you set off, you go "Wow!". The hair stands up on the back of your neck.'

FIRST, THE GOOD NEWS...

The Ibiza's quirky looks have won many fans. Veronica Clare told us she likes 'the shape of the front and the headlights. I call it the Batmobile'. The interior didn't catch owners' imagination quite as much, but they found it well equipped, spacious in the front, and with good luggage space. The back seats, though, are probably suitable only for children and smaller adults.

Owners were happy with the car's performance, and those with the 1.4-litre petrol and 1.9-litre TDi versions were impressed with the quick acceleration and cruising power. The steering was another plus point.'It's very light...manoeuvrable and easy to drive,' according to Veronica Clare. All owners enjoyed driving the car.'It's fun to drive,' Denise Harvey told us.'It's comfortable and the size makes me feel I'm in complete control.' This is helped by good visibility and a comfortable driving position. The SE and Sport models have adjustable height seats, which owners appreciated. A minor downside is the firm suspension: three of the four TDi Sport owners found it was harsh on bumpy surfaces.

...AND NOW THE BAD

Despite enthusiastic feedback, seven owners experienced faults. Some had only minor niggles, but two experienced a catalogue of errors. Mark Wood had problems with the air conditioning, warning lights, power steering, alternator, and trim. He received poor service from his dealer, too. 'I'm a wee bit disillusioned,' he told us.'It's still a good car to drive but you always have a nagging doubt about whether you're going to get home.'

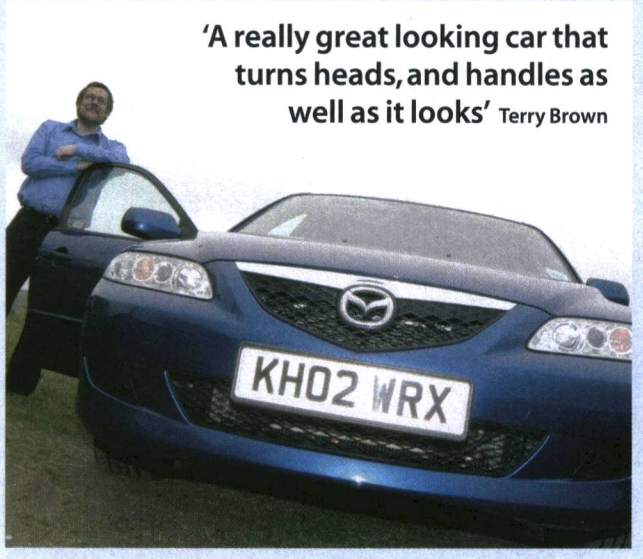
Denise Harvey had a similar list of complaints – again mainly electrical faults.'When I'm driving, the dashboard lights go out for a matter of seconds,' she told us.'It can happen anything from twice to 50 times in an hour.' And her dealer returned the car without effective repairs. More seriously, Tim Mayled noticed a small oil leak, which couldn't be fixed, so Seat had to replace the car.

Both Mark and Denise were hesitant to recommend the Ibiza, but the others were fairly tolerant of the car's glitches and would still recommend it. It seems that, for the price, it's still an attractive, if flawed, overall package.

FACTS FROM WHICH? CAR

On-the-road price	£7,995 to £13,995
Size (l x w)	3.96m x 1.70m
Engine sizes (litre)	1.2 to 1.4 (petrol) 1.9 (diesel)
Fuel consumption (mpg)	40.9 to 47.9 (petrol) 56.5 to 57.6 (diesel)
Company car tax	15 to 17 per cent (petrol) 18 per cent (diesel)
CO_2 emissions (g/km)	144 to 168 (petrol) 135 to 138 (diesel)
Brand reliability	good
Safety	fair

MAZDA 6



'A really great looking car that turns heads, and handles as well as it looks' Terry Brown

FACTS FROM WHICH? CAR

On-the-road price	£13,495 to £18,595
Size (l x w)	4.67m x 1.78m
Engine sizes (litre)	1.8 to 2.3 (petrol) 2.0 (diesel)
Fuel consumption (mpg)	31.7 to 36.2 (petrol) 43.5 (diesel)
Company car tax	21 to 26 per cent (petrol) 18 per cent (diesel)
CO_2 emissions (g/km)	185 to 212 (petrol) 172 to 174 (diesel)
Brand reliability	best
Safety	fair

'Of the seven Mazdas I've had, not one of them has ever been in for a mechanical repair.' So Alan Vines told us, typifying the brand loyalty we found among Mazda 6 owners, and the impressive reliability of the brand. Six of the ten owners we spoke to had previously owned a Mazda, and one true devotee had owned 16 of them.

STYLISH AND SPACIOUS

There's more to the Mazda 6 than just reliability, though. Since its launch last summer, it's received favourable press reviews, and most of the owners we spoke to felt the car lived up to its reputation as a stylish, spacious and sporty family car. The looks were a major factor in attracting the buyers who spoke to us. John Lee told us: 'It's just drop dead gorgeous. You see very few of them on the road, and it turns heads wherever it's parked.'

Owners felt the car offers ample room for a family and accompanying luggage. The folding rear seats (in both the saloon and hatchback) were especially popular. 'You just pull a handle in the boot and they go absolutely flat, so that it's almost like an estate car,' David Lancaster told us.

There's also a good quality interior with equipment such as climate control, CD player, and cruise control on all except the basic models.

'LIKE A SPORTS CAR'

The 'fantastic' acceleration, road holding and steering in the Mazda 6 were also real strong points. David Meager was surprised to find that 'it corners like a sports car. That's what they were advertising at the time, and I thought it would be a load of old cobblers, but, no, it's right.' The sporty suspension wasn't to everyone's liking, though – three owners found it too firm on some roads.

PROMPT SERVICE

Two owners reported problems – one with the starter motor and another with ventilation – but these were fixed promptly by Mazda dealers, reinforcing positive impressions of the brand. In short, this car brought a smile to its owners' faces, and looks like a good buy at the price.

VAUXHALL VECTRA

Eight of the owners we spoke to had owned a previous version of the Vectra. They all felt many aspects of the new car, particularly the styling, were a big improvement. Owner John Haley thought the performance was also better. 'It seems to be a better matching of gearbox and engine,' he told us. John owns the 2.0-litre diesel version, and those with the 2.2 petrol model were also happy with performance. Gavin Little, however, felt his 1.8-litre version was 'slightly underpowered.'

A COMFORTABLE RIDE

Several owners pointed out that the Vectra was quiet and comfortable, particularly on long journeys and motorway driving. Most found the suspension fairly firm, but this had its benefits. 'I think it's about right,' said John Haley. 'It's slightly harder than the previous Vectra, but I think that gives you more confidence in the handling.' Everyone we spoke to agreed that handling and cornering were very good.

INSIDE EXTRAS

All the owners also felt the Vectra was well equipped and offered good value for money. All the models have air conditioning or climate control, rain-sensitive wipers, and cruise control. The higher spec versions (Elegance and above) also have a multi CD-changer, an on-board computer (for displaying fuel and mileage figures, for example), and a wood effect trim inside.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Vauxhalls generally have a poor reliability record. Fortunately, nobody we spoke to had serious problems with their car, but five mentioned minor faults with the alarm, radio, alternator, air conditioning, and trim. Dealers usually managed to fix these, though service standards varied.

Six owners felt rear visibility was poor, and that the Vectra needs larger cubby holes for storage. But, despite these gripes, all owners seemed fairly happy and would recommend their car.

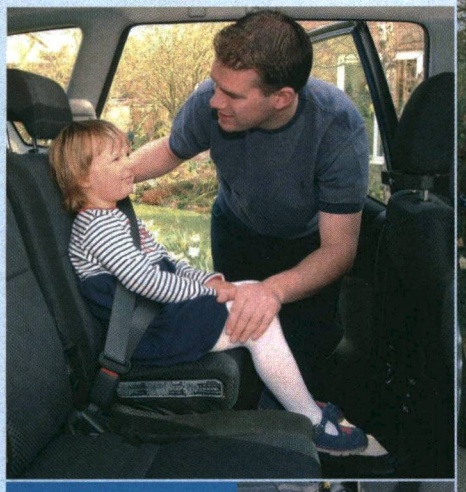
'Striking to look at...and a good driving experience' Gavin Little

FACTS FROM WHICH? CAR

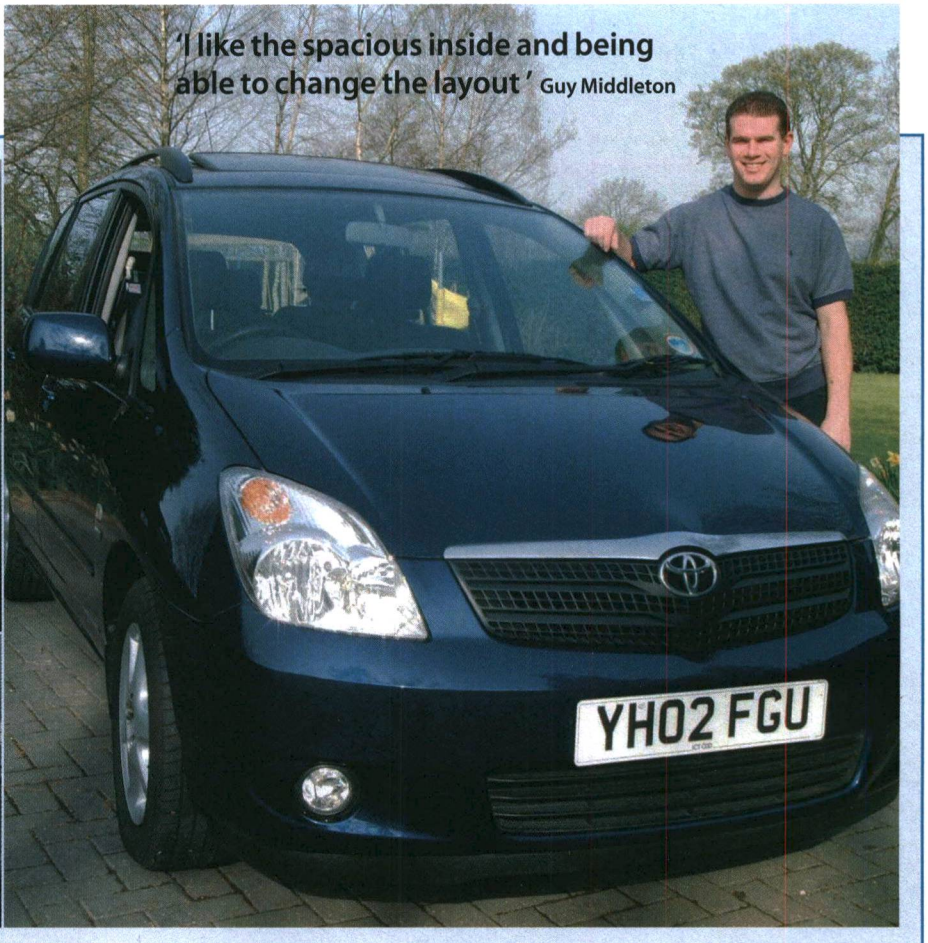
On-the-road price	£14,645 to £20,980
Size (l x w) including mirrors	4.60m x 2.04m
Engine sizes (litre)	1.8 to 3.2 (petrol) 2.0 to 2.2 (diesel)
Fuel consumption (mpg)	28.0 to 36.7 (petrol) 43.5 to 47.9 (diesel)
Company car tax	20 to 35 per cent (petrol) 18 to 22 per cent (diesel)
CO_2 emissions (g/km)	184 to 286 (petrol) 159 to 176 (diesel)
Brand reliability	poor
Safety	good

PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL FRANCIS PHOTOGRAPHY, PHILIP REESON, WINPENNY PHOTOGRAPHY

TOYOTA COROLLA VERSO



'I think the integrated child booster seats are fantastic,' owner Guy Middleton (pictured) told us. Our safety experts agree: they think this unusual feature really improves seat belt safety for children



'I like the spacious inside and being able to change the layout' Guy Middleton

This mini-MPV version of the ever-popular Toyota Corolla is a practical, spacious all-rounder, according to its owners. Around half bought it because they were looking for extra space and versatility. One owner, Alanah Jeffries, told us: 'I really did want a multi-purpose vehicle type of thing – something flexible. I sometimes put a bike in the back.' Owners also liked the high seats that make the car easy to get in and out of.

Loyalty to the brand, together with Toyota's excellent reliability record, played a significant part in several of our owners' buying decisions.

STRENGTH IN DEPTH

The Corolla Verso may not be the sort of car to elicit gushing praise at first sight, but it clearly has many and varied qualities that you'll appreciate the more you drive it. Most owners liked the exterior, though several pointed out that it looks fairly indistinct from similar cars. But half of the owners we spoke to were quick to mention the good build quality, and they were more complimentary about what's inside.

FAMILY FRIENDLY

There's plenty of head- and leg-room all round, and good internal storage. Mike Skinner enthused that there's 'stacks of room. It's got 46 or 47 stowage compartments all over the place.' The in-built child booster seats in the back (see photos, above) were also singled out for praise from several owners, making the Verso an ideal car for a young family. Our safety experts also approve of the booster seats, which are designed for children aged four to 10.

RECOMMENDED RIDE

Most of our owners had the 1.8-litre petrol version, and found the performance adequate, if a little slow on acceleration. They agreed it was easy to drive and holds the road well, with fuel consumption similar to the official figures below.

Four owners experienced minor problems – including rattles, squeaks, and broken clips on the boot space cover – but their dealers swiftly fixed these faults. So, overall, all the owners felt they'd found an ideal car for their needs, and would happily recommend it.

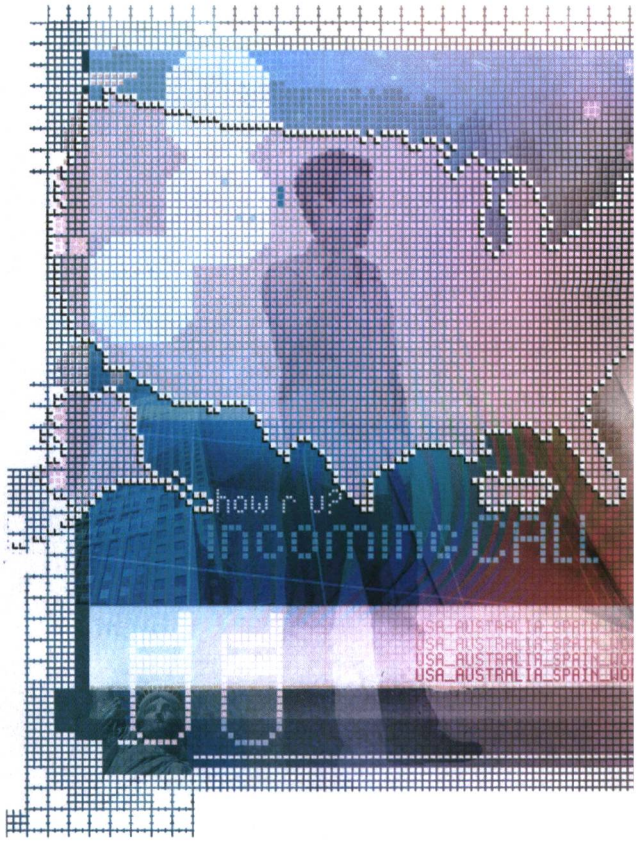
FACTS FROM WHICH? CAR

On-the-road price	£13,495 to £16,495
Size (l x w)	4.24m x 1.7m
Engine sizes (litre)	1.6 to 1.8 (petrol) 2.0 (diesel)
Fuel consumption (mpg)	37.2 to 38.7(petrol) 45.6 (diesel)
Company car tax	18 to 20 per cent (petrol) 19 per cent (diesel)
CO_2 emissions (g/km)	174 to 181(petrol) 164 (diesel)
Brand reliability	best
Safety	fair

MORE OWNERS' OPINIONS WANTED

We need your views on the following cars: **Audi A8** (from November 2002), **Citroën C8**, **Fiat Stilo Multi Wagon** (from March 2003), **Ford Fusion**, new **Honda Accord** (from March 2003), **Hyundai Getz**, **Kia Carens** (from November 2002), **Mazda 2**, new **Renault Mégane** (from October 2002), new **Saab 9-3 Sports Saloon** (from September 2002), **Skoda Superb**, new **Toyota Avensis** (from March 2003). Please send your name, address, phone number, the exact model of your car, and when you took delivery of it to Dept NL at our Hertford address (see p2) or to **helpwanted@which.net**. Alternatively, visit **www.which.co.uk/motoring/helpwanted/motoringqs2**.

HOW MOBILE IS YOUR MOBILE?



Mobile phones are designed to travel, but roaming can be more complicated and costly than you might expect

Jenni Conti gives tips on avoiding a huge phone bill when using your mobile abroad

For some, 'roaming' might conjure up images of wandering freely, but using your mobile abroad requires rather more forethought. Fail to do your homework before you go away, and you could find that your phone is even less use than the travel iron you insisted on packing. And, if you don't pay attention to how much you use your mobile, you could be paying off the bill long after your tan has faded. Follow our guide to roaming and your mobile should make an ideal holiday companion.

SPENDING MONEY

You might have accounted for souvenirs and sangria, but don't forget to include the cost of roaming in your holiday budget. You'll have to pay to receive calls, as well as make them, because your UK network has to pay a foreign network to send calls to you abroad, and it passes this cost on to you. So call charges can be steep. Vodafone pay-as-you-go customers in Australia will pay a whopping £1.99 per minute to receive UK calls. For pay-monthly customers it's 93p. Orange pay-as-you-go users will pay £1.20 per minute to call the UK from Spain, but for pay-monthly customers, it's half that price.

As these examples show, roaming call costs for pay-as-you-go phones are usually more expensive than those for pay-monthly contracts. On some networks, £10 credit will give you less than 10 minutes' call time.

The high cost of mobile roaming hasn't gone unnoticed. In 2001 Oftel, the telecoms regulator, accused UK operators of exploiting a lack of consumer awareness by charging so much for pre-pay roaming. Earlier that year European Commission officials inspected the offices of mobile phone companies in the UK and Germany following 'serious competition concerns regarding pricing practices for mobile roaming'. The European Commission has not yet reported any findings, but its investigation is ongoing.

CHECK THE EXCHANGE RATE

Roaming may be expensive, but it can be the only way to remain in two-way contact with others while abroad (although it doesn't always go according to plan – see 'French connection', p50). The tables on p51 show roaming costs from the main UK providers in Australia, Spain and Florida (in the US call costs can vary between states). These are broadly indicative of costs in Australasia, Europe and North America. However, before leaving, always find out what your provider charges for roaming in the country you're travelling to.

Charges vary There are four networks – O2, Orange, T-Mobile and Vodafone. We have shown prices for these networks, plus Virgin, in our tables. If your service provider isn't among these, contact it for roaming costs. They may be different from those shown, although several of the service providers, including British Gas, BT Mobile Sense, One.Tel and Telecom Plus, which use one or more of the four main networks, told us that they charge their customers whatever the network being used charges. Dial-a-Phone said customers using the Orange and T-Mobile networks will be charged the standard roaming rates that these operators charge, but that this isn't always the case for customers on the O2 and Vodafone networks. It advises customers to check prices before travelling. Singlepoint also said prices for its customers using the O2 and Vodafone networks can vary from the networks' rates.

Most mobile operators charge flat rates for calls and text messages to the UK from a given country no matter what time of day it is, or what foreign network

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN TRENHOLM ILLUSTRATION REDSEAL

Keep costs down by doing your research first

Make sure your mobile will work abroad

Texts and phone cards are cost effective

you use. So, you can simply turn on your phone when you arrive and use the network it defaults to automatically. But there are exceptions. Virgin and Vodafone charge different call rates depending on which foreign network you use. Vodafone also charges different amounts for text messages depending on the network used, as does Orange, but for pay-monthly customers only. In these instances, it's worth finding out which network is cheapest before you leave, so that you can manually select it when you arrive (see your mobile handbook for instructions on how to do this).

Calling the UK The tables on p51 show the cost of making calls to, and receiving calls from, the UK while overseas. If you're likely to be phoning other destinations, or making 'local' calls – which are, in fact, routed via the UK – then check how much these calls cost before you set off.

Pay-monthly customers with O2, T-Mobile and Vodafone can benefit from reduced roaming rates by subscribing to international discount schemes that offer significant reductions (see the table 'International roaming plans', p51). For instance, the standard O2 charge for receiving a call from the UK in Spain is 94p per minute. But paying £2.99 to subscribe to its International Traveller Scheme reduces this to 28p per minute. This means the cost of using the scheme for a month will be paid for after just five minutes of calls. These international discount schemes cost a few pounds per month and you can usually sign up as and when you need them. Unfortunately, they're not available to pay-as-you-go customers.

SUN, SEA AND TEXT

The temptation of calling home to say 'wish you were here' might prove hard to resist once you're away. But

WRITE BACK

If you have comments or questions about anything you've read in *Which?* this month, contact us at **writeback@which.net**. We publish some of your questions in 'Write back', p4, and more online at **www.which.co.uk/whichextra**

TIPS FOR SAVING MONEY

Depending on how often you travel and where you go, you could save money by following these guidelines.

ANNUAL HOLIDAYMAKER

If you usually head overseas once a year and want to take your phone, try the following:

- Subscribe to an international discount scheme and you could benefit from significant savings if you anticipate using your phone for more than just emergency calls.
- Whenever possible, text rather than phone and get others to do the same, so you can avoid hefty charges for making and answering calls.
- Use payphones to make local calls and buy an international calling card for calls back to the UK.

THE JET-SET LIFESTYLE

If you visit several destinations a year, then roaming is probably second nature, but to avoid a second mortgage, you could:

- Change from a pay-as-you-go tariff to a pay-monthly contract, unless you only intend to use your phone for emergencies.
- Sign up to an international discount scheme – the cost should soon be outweighed by savings.
- For ease, choose a provider that charges a flat rate for all networks operating within each country. This will save you the hassle of having to find out and select the cheapest network each time you travel to a different country.

A HOME IN THE SUN

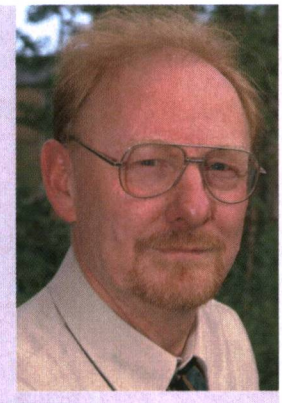
If you've splashed out on a second home abroad, consider the following:

- Buy a SIM card for a local network. You should quickly recoup the initial costs, even if you have to pay to have your phone unlocked.
- Choose the UK network with the cheapest call costs for that country and subscribe to its international discount scheme.

there are steps you can take to use your mobile in the most cost-efficient way. Send a text rather than call and ask others to do the same. The cost of a text is often much cheaper than even a minute on the phone and, unlike calls, you don't pay for incoming messages.

If you're confident that no one will need to speak to you urgently, you could bar incoming calls. Alternatively, divert all calls to another number in the UK and set up a message asking people to leave non-urgent messages or to text you with anything urgent.

FRENCH CONNECTION



Paris has something to offer everyone, which is why the Binghams thought it was the perfect place for a family trip last year. The idea was for the children to amuse themselves at EuroDisney while the adults strolled around the Louvre. Then, with the aid of modern mobile technology, they would arrange to meet up.

But, during their two-week stay, the Binghams managed to communicate only once by mobile. Despite activating both their T-Mobile phones in advance, one of them couldn't find a signal. T-Mobile maintains it has excellent coverage in Paris, especially on the Bouygues network. In fact, customers can check which networks have the best coverage in Europe before they leave.

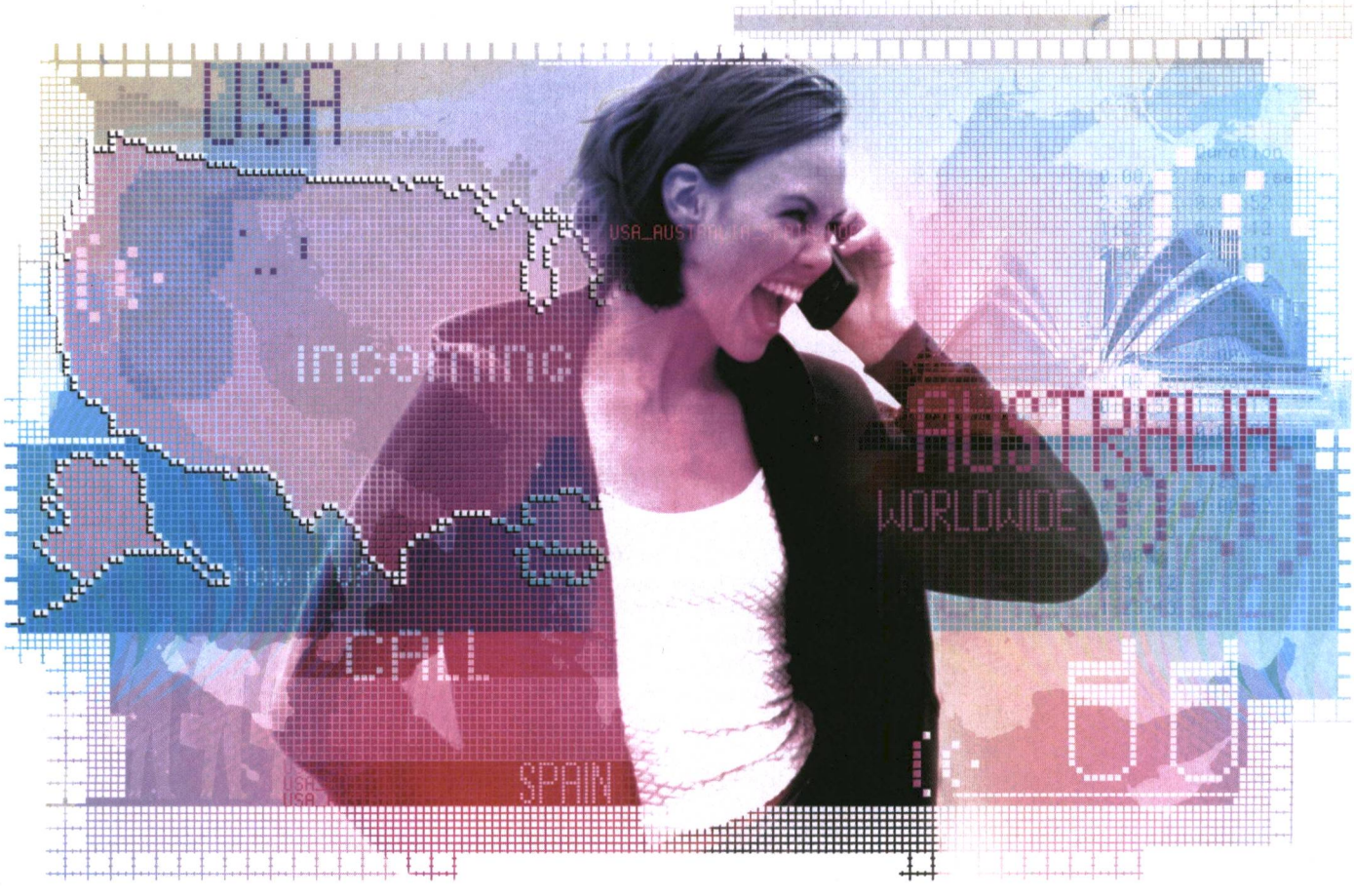
T-Mobile says customers should contact it when the problem arises, so that they can diagnose the fault. In true French style, though, Richard Bingham remains philosophical: 'Perhaps this proves that a holiday is meant to be a mobile-free zone.'

Using voicemail while abroad can be expensive, too. Listening to messages usually costs the same as calling back to the UK for the duration of the message. Conditional diverts, such as diverting calls to voicemail when you're on the phone, are even more costly. This is because you often pay to receive calls to your phone and then send them to your voicemail in the UK. So, either turn off your voicemail altogether or switch off conditional diverts and leave an extended message asking people to leave only urgent messages.

DON'T FORGET YOUR TOOTHBRUSH...OR CHARGER

There's more to ensuring you can use your mobile phone abroad than just remembering to pack it. Don't forget to take a travel adaptor so that you can plug in your charger. Contact your service provider well in advance to make sure you can use your phone in the country you're travelling to. Not all networks allow you to roam everywhere. Orange pay-as-you-go customers are limited to just 19 countries, for instance.

There's also a good chance that your service provider will have to activate your phone for use abroad. Orange, O2 and T-Mobile might also ask for a deposit, depending on your credit history. Virgin has a standard £100 credit limit for roaming, and T-Mobile and Vodafone will sometimes put one in place. We've reported some of the problems caused by credit limits while roaming before (see 'O2 be in England... and avoid mobile roaming', March 2003, p5).



PHOTOGRAPHY MIKE FORD

You'll also need to check your phone will work at your destination. Networks in the US and Canada use different radio frequencies from the rest of the world. The dual-band phones that many of us use in the UK won't work in these countries – you'll need a tri-band phone instead. There are similar network compatibility issues in other countries, such as Japan and some Caribbean islands. O2, T-Mobile and Vodafone all rent phones that can be used in such destinations, either directly, or via third-party suppliers, and you can also hire them once you're overseas. Costs vary – you can rent a tri-band phone for around £20 to £30 a week – but you might also have to leave a large credit card deposit.

Check with your provider that there's good network coverage in the country you're visiting. And, if you need to access messages while overseas, check whether you need to set up a new access code to do so. Sorting these issues out before you leave will save you both hassle and money. Once abroad calls to customer services are expensive, costing as much as £2 per minute.

PHONING HOME

All phone numbers in your mobile's address book need to be preceded by the appropriate international code. For UK numbers that's +44 followed by the national code minus the first zero. It's also worth adding useful numbers such as your insurance company helpline and the British Embassy, so that they're easy to access in case of an emergency.

YOUR MOBILE ISN'T THE ONLY ANSWER

Your mobile is unlikely to be the cheapest way to make calls once abroad. Payphones are usually much more economical for local calls. For example, local calls from Australian payphones cost just 40c (16p) for as long as you like. You can also buy international phone cards while overseas or via the internet before you leave, which offer cheap rates to call the UK. For instance, calls to the UK from Australia can be as little as 2c (less than a penny) per minute, with a 59c (24p) connection fee.

Foreign SIMs For longer stays or repeat visits to a particular country, consider buying a pay-as-you-go SIM card for one of its local networks. The SIM is the electronic chip that ties you to a particular network and changing to a foreign one could cut costs substantially because calls won't have to go via your UK network. This should make local calls much cheaper and means you won't be charged when someone phones you.

You can buy foreign SIM cards from mobile phone retailers or via the internet before you go and then simply pay as you go once abroad. The Carphone Warehouse sells Spanish and Portuguese SIM cards for £19.99, for instance. But, before you do, check whether or not your phone is SIM-locked. If it is, you'll have to pay your UK provider to unlock it for use with a different SIM card, which could cost from £15. Of course, the downside of changing your SIM while abroad is that you'll have a different number from the one you use in the UK.

PAY-MONTHLY ROAMING

	Orange	O2	T-Mobile	Virgin[1]	Vodafone[2]
No. countries where roaming is available	127	144	130	120	140
COST OF RECEIVING A CALL FROM THE UK IN					
Australia	35p	£1.30	70p	20p	93p
Spain	30p	94p	70p	30p	75p
USA, Florida	55p[3]	£1.20	70p	£1.00	92p
COST OF MAKING A CALL TO THE UK FROM					
Australia	70p	85p	75p	55p	36p
Spain	60p[4]	85p	75p	55p	75p
USA, Florida	£1.10	£1.37	90p	£1.00	£1.26
COST OF TEXT MESSAGING THE UK FROM					
Australia	20p	30p	40p	30p	20p
Spain	30p	25p	40p	30p	37p
USA, Florida	35p	25p	40p	30p	35p

Correct at 1 June 2003

Call costs are per minute for the cheapest network inclusive of VAT (where applicable). Text costs are for the cheapest network including UK messaging costs, if charged separately, and inclusive of VAT (where applicable). We've shown prices for calls to and from Florida in the US but charges can vary between US states. Not all foreign networks will bill by the second.

1 Mobile roaming is only available to customers who pay by direct debit, although it is due to be extended to pay-as-you-go customers in late summer

2 Vodafone roaming rates can vary according to the tariff you subscribe to. The costs above are based on the Vodafone 20 tariff

3 65p from 9 June 2003

4 70p from 9 June 2003

PAY AS YOU GO ROAMING

	Orange	O2	T-Mobile	Vodafone
No. of countries where roaming is available	19	146	128	140
COST OF RECEIVING A CALL FROM THE UK IN				
Australia	see[1]	£1.49	£1.00	£1.99
Spain	60p	£1.49	£1.00	75p
USA, Florida	see[1]	£1.49	90p	£1.99
COST OF MAKING A CALL TO THE UK FROM				
Australia	see[1]	99p	£1.00	£1.99
Spain	£1.20	99p	£1.00	75p
USA, Florida	see[1]	99p	£1.20	£1.99
COST OF TEXT MESSAGING THE UK FROM				
Australia	see[1]	49p	40p	99p
Spain	40p	49p	40p	39p
USA, Florida	see[1]	49p	40p	99p

Correct at 1 June 2003

Call costs are per minute for the cheapest network inclusive of VAT (where applicable). The text costs shown are for the cheapest network including UK messaging costs, if charged separately, and inclusive of VAT (where applicable). We've shown prices for calls to and from Florida in the US but charges can vary between US states. Not all foreign networks will bill by the second.

1 Pay-as-you-go service not available to these destinations

INTERNATIONAL ROAMING PLANS

Provider	Plan	Monthly cost	Discount
O2	International Traveller Service	£2.99[1]	Up to 30 per cent discount on calls to the UK from the EU and reductions on receiving calls and phoning within a country[2]
T-Mobile	World Class	Free	Flat rate of 69p per minute on World Class networks in 25 countries[3]
T-Mobile	International Option	£2.50	Reductions on receiving calls while roaming[4]
Vodafone	Eurocall and International Call Saver	£2.50[5]	Flat rate of 60p per minute to make a call and 30p per minute to receive a call using a 'gold' network in 32 European countries.[6] Also reduces cost of receiving calls outside Europe

Correct at 1 June 2003

1 Free to O2 flat rate 250, O2 200, O2 250, O2 400, O2 Max, O2 1,500, O2 5,000, O2 10,000

2 Also gives 80 per cent off the O2 standard rate for calls from the UK to abroad

3 99p per minute on other networks. Check with T-Mobile for World Class partners

4 Also gives 40 per cent to 90 per cent off standard rate for calls from the UK to abroad

5 Free to 800 minute price plans and above

6 Also includes International Call Saver scheme giving 70 per cent off standard rate for calls from the UK to abroad

ask the experts

This month, questions on food scares

Send us your questions
experts@which.net
Ask the experts,
PO Box 44 Hertford X,
SG14 1SH

Rachel Clemons puts into perspective the link between fried food and cancer, food poisoning from organic chicken, and more

Sweet truth

Q What's the risk of gelatine from animals with BSE getting into sweets?

A Measures are in place in the UK that mean we should be well protected against BSE entering our food chain, including via sweets. Gelatine is produced from the bone of animals, mainly cattle and pigs. But, under EU law, only healthy animals that have been inspected and approved by the veterinary authorities can be used in its production. And parts that carry a higher risk of harbouring the BSE agent, such as the spinal cords of animals over a year old, can't be used. Gelatine imported from countries outside the EU has to match EU standards. While there's no evidence that these measures combined aren't effective, it's easy to see why people are concerned. Results of a recent survey, which found beef protein in chicken, renewed doubts about how effectively beef products are traced throughout the food chain.

Fear of frying

Q The papers last year were full of news of a link between acrylamide in fried food and cancer, but I haven't heard anything since. What's happening?

A Acrylamide is a chemical that is produced naturally when food is baked or fried. It can cause cancer in animals, and its presence in some foods may be harmful to humans. In April 2002, scientists in Sweden discovered unexpectedly large amounts of acrylamide in foods rich in starch that had been cooked at high temperatures, including crisps, chips and crispbreads. The European Commission is co-ordinating initiatives to identify what can be done to reduce levels of acrylamide in food, better understand the chemical effects of processing and cooking, and help clarify the possible risk to public health as further research is needed to resolve the issue. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is funding a survey of acrylamide in the UK diet, results of which are due in the autumn. Until more is known, its advice is that we don't change our diets or alter the way we cook, and that we continue to eat a healthy, balanced diet including plenty of fruit and veg.

Irradiation unease

Q Should I be concerned about eating irradiated foods?

A Irradiation involves exposing food to electron beams, X-rays or gamma rays. It's used to kill food-poisoning bacteria, delay ripening, and to help stop vegetables sprouting. Some groups think food shouldn't be irradiated as the process produces free radicals (oxidants) that may be harmful to our health. Consumers' Association has always expressed concern that irradiation could be misused to counteract poor hygiene practice earlier on in the food chain. But the government argues that irradiation is an effective way to kill bacteria, and that there's no evidence it poses a health risk. Currently herbs and spices are the only irradiated foods permitted by the EU, and these have to declare on the label that they have been irradiated. You won't find them on sale in the UK, although the FSA has identified other, illegally irradiated foods on sale in this country (notably food supplements).

Drink problem

Q I read that drinking wine may increase the risk of breast cancer. Is this true?

A Many newspapers last November reported on a study which concluded that there's a possible link between drinking alcohol (not just wine) and an increased risk of breast cancer. Not every article pointed out that the effect of alcohol on breast cancer must be looked at in the context of its beneficial effects, when taken in moderation, on heart disease, and its harmful effects on the mouth, larynx, oesophagus and liver. Though the research found that the risk of breast cancer increased as alcohol intake increased, the increase in terms of absolute risk is small. Sticking to the recommended limit of up to two to three units a day for women should mean you avoid the negative effects of alcohol.

In a flap about chicken

Q Is it true that organic food – and in particular organic chicken – is more likely to contain food-poisoning bugs?

A Studies to date don't show any significant difference between organic and conventional food in terms of contamination with bacteria like campylobacter and salmonella. Extensively farmed poultry (both free range and organic), where birds can roam outdoors, are more likely to come into contact with campylobacter than intensively farmed poultry, because this bacteria is widespread in the environment. The Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food is looking at ways to reduce infection. You should cook all meat (not just organic) thoroughly in order to kill campylobacter and other bacteria and thus reduce the risk of food poisoning. Good hygiene in the kitchen – including cleaning your hands after handling raw meat to prevent cross contamination – and washing fruit and veg before eating them also help.

QUESTIONS, PLEASE

Our experts are now looking for questions on: • **Digital recording** • **Credit scoring** • **Foot care** (from general tips on keeping feet healthy to more specific queries such as options for accessing foot care services) and • **Plasma TVs.** Send your questions to **'Ask the experts'** at our Hertford address, above, or email **experts@which.net**. We may edit letters or use only an extract. We regret that our experts will answer only questions that we publish.

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN TRENHOLM ILLUSTRATION KEVIN EVANS

NEW TECHNOLOGY

IS 3 REALLY THE MAGIC NUMBER?

The NEC e606 is one of the first 3G phones to be launched

In March this year, 3 became the fifth mobile phone network to be launched in the UK. It's the first to use 3G, the third generation of mobile phone technology, which offers more multi-media applications than existing 2G networks. The 'killer application' offered by 3G is video calling, which means you can see the person you're talking to – as long as they're at the end of a 3G compatible phone and in an area with 3G network coverage. Interactive services, such as video and photo messaging, email and games, are also available.

We tested the NEC e606 handset, which costs £400 and offers all of 3's services except built-in email. It's a clam-shell model, but is surprisingly bulky and lacks some of the features you'd expect from a new phone. For instance, you can't answer a call simply by opening the handset (you have to press a button as well) and it doesn't have any built-in games. However, its video screen is bigger than most and it includes two cameras – one facing outwards and one inwards – that can be used for video and stills.

Video calling worked well although, in our opinion, the picture doesn't match up to the TV ads. A clever function is being able to switch between the two cameras during a call, which means you can show what's going on around you. You can also view a picture within a picture to see what you're sending as well as the person you're speaking to. However, there's no speaker phone function when video calling, so you have to use a hands-free kit, and there are no direct keys for volume control.

Making video clips is less user friendly because you're limited to just 12 seconds and can view only a thumbnail image while recording, rather than the full screen. This is also the case for digital photos, although final picture quality was very good in comparison to the Sharp GX10 that we used to test the Vodafone Live! GPRS service (see 'Vodafone's new GPRS service', *Which?*, February 2003, p57).

Online services include downloadable video clips (sport, entertainment and news), alerts and maps. The clips that we downloaded were clear and smooth but took a relatively long time to download – two minutes for one and a half minutes of news footage. Moving between pages was slow and prone to failed connections.

3G network coverage is a major issue, as it's limited to major cities, with little or no coverage in rural areas such as the South West, East Anglia, Wales and Scotland. In these areas your phone will default to the 2G network – which means you can use your phone only for calls and text. The phone automatically moves from one network to another and indicates which one it's using onscreen. However, if you move from 3G to 2G while making a call, you'll get cut off.

Kit and Caboodle are the two contract tariffs offered by 3. Both include a certain number of calls, messages and downloads, but are pricey. Kit costs £60 per month and Caboodle costs £100 per month. Or you can opt for 3toGo, the no-contract option where you pay for the services you use. But at 50p per minute for video calls, 50p per video message and downloads from 10p to £2, it's not cheap.

Overall we were disappointed by the 3G experience. Although making videos is fun and photos are good quality, online services are slow and expensive. Leaving network and handset limitations aside, we simply don't think 3G services are worth the extra cost. ▷

Self-cleaning windows

A new type of glass could make window cleaning much easier. Pilkington Activ, which was launched last year, uses a photocatalytic process to break down dirt using UV light from the sun. The glass is also hydrophilic, which means that water spreads evenly over the surface instead of forming droplets, so rainwater or water from a hose simply rinses the dirt away.

We tested the new glass against a standard pane over a two-month period. We exposed both panes to the elements and sprayed areas of both with dirty water. We were pleasantly surprised to find the Activ pane was noticeably cleaner than the standard glass. In fact we struggled to find the odd smeary trace on the Activ glass – even on the area we'd sprayed.

The technology doesn't work instantly, nor does it completely do away with window cleaning – you'll still need to clean the inside – and it won't deal with some marks such as paint. But it does make life simpler.

The Activ glass is widely available – see 'Contacts', p58, for details – and costs about 15 to 20 per cent more than a sealed unit of standard glass.

ILLUSTRATION PAUL BOMMER

best buymonitor

Each month, we keep you up to date with the cheapest prices for Best Buys from past tests which are still available. Copies of past articles can be found at www.which.co.uk/whichextra

BEST BUY MONITOR

	Best Buys	Price (£)	Where to buy on the high street	Online price (£)	Where to buy online	Notes
DISHWASHERS Last report December 2002 Next report August 2003						
Full sized	Whirlpool 6th Sense ADP 7966	350	Currys	296	unbeatable.co.uk	Cleans well and has a good range of features. Model number changed from Whirlpool 6th Sense ADP 5966. Antibacterial cycle added.
Slimline	Bosch SRS43C02GB Classixx	300	Comet or Currys	257	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Takes nine place settings (a full-sized model takes 12). Model number changed from Bosch SRS43A02GB Classixx. No significant changes.
Compact	Zanussi Studio Line DCE5655	280	Currys	268	bedirect.co.uk	A 'table-top' model which takes six place settings. If cleaning power is top priority, you're better off with a full-sized or compact model.
FREEZERS Last report May 2003						
Tall upright	AEG Arctis 2494-6GA	600	Allders	469	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Frost-free, with 191 litres of usable space. A-rated for energy efficiency.
	Hotpoint Future RZA50P	315	John Lewis	267	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	145 litres of usable space. A-rated for energy efficiency.
	Liebherr Premium GSN 3326	*729*	Independents	616	unbeatable.co.uk	Frost-free. Pricey, but has 260 litres of usable space and lots of features Will be replaced by GSNP 3326, which is rated A+ for energy efficiency.
	Miele F 7462 SNH-1	630	Allders	520	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Frost-free, with 225 litres of usable space. B-rated for energy efficiency.
	Zanussi ZFA 96W	*369*	Independents	336	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	142 litres of usable space. A-rated for energy efficiency.
Worktop height	AEG Arctis 1283-7GS	250	Allders	224	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	90 litres of usable space. A-rated for energy efficiency.
	Bosch GSL 12420GB	239	John Lewis	299	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	83 litres of usable space. A-rated for energy efficiency.
	Electrolux EU 6241 T	139	John Lewis	173	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Excellent value. 97 litres of usable space. B-rated for energy efficiency.
	Miele Electronic F 7139 S	260	Co-operative Group	235	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	95 litres of usable space. A-rated for energy efficiency. Better at coping with power cuts than other worktop-height Best Buys.
FRIDGE-FREEZERS Last report April 2002 Next update March 2004						
Tall upright – freestanding	Bosch KGU 32121	429	John Lewis	384	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Antibacterial coating added. Model number changed from Bosch KGU 32120GB. Being phased out for new model range.
	Samsung SR-L3928B	500	Co-operative Group	379	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Tall model with useful features, though noisier than most. Shape of door has been changed and pockets now transparent.
Discontinued or significantly altered Best Buys Siemens KS28V22, Whirlpool ARZ 897-1/H						
FRIDGES Last report September 2001 Next report October 2003						
Larder fridges – tall	Bosch KSR 34421GB	499	John Lewis	434	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Antibacterial coating added. Cosmetic changes will be made in June. Model number will change to Bosch KSR 34423GB.
Larder fridges – worktop height	Beko NRC110	110	Miller Brothers	130	coopelectricalshop.co.uk	Includes ice-making compartment. Colour change from off white to brilliant white. Model number changed from Beko RC110.
	Bosch KTR 15460GB	*280*	Independents	205	electricaldiscountuk.co.uk	Antibacterial coating added. Minor cosmetic changes. Model number will change to Bosch KTR 15463GB.
	Haier 166AE	*150*	Independents	see[1]	see[1]	Good fridge with plenty of convenient features. Model number changed from Haier HR 166NR. No significant changes.
Fridges with icebox – worktop height	Haier 146AA	*150*	Independents	see[1]	see[1]	Excellent performance all-round, with good-sized four-star icebox. Model number changed from Haier HR 146NR. No significant changes.
	Lec ER 550AW	*170*	Independents	163	qed-uk.com	Good fridge but only two-star icebox. Colour change to silver planned.
Built-in larder fridge – worktop height	AEG Santo U8600i	469	B & Q	289	trade-appliances.co.uk	Made a Best Buy on value but high-street price has gone up by £100, so buy online. Cosmetic changes. Model number changed from U66000i.
Built-in with icebox – worktop height	Siemens KU 14L440GB	*450*	Independents	390	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	High-scoring fridge with four-star ice box. Antibacterial coating added. Model number changed from Siemens KU 14L05GB.
MICROWAVES Last report January 2002 (combination) December 2002 (microwave only) Next report December 2003 (combination and grill)						
Microwave only	LG Intellowave MS-256EL	*100*	Independents	90	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Easily the best basic model on test. Scored full marks on the main tests.
	Samsung M1815N	55	Comet	59	comet.co.uk	Good all-round performance but not quite as good as the LG.
	Samsung M1875N	80	Comet	64	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Similar heating quality to M1815N but also has electronic timer.
Combination (includes grill and convection oven)	Sharp R-967	270	Currys	188	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Has lost its price advantage over the superior Whirlpool. Cosmetic changes. Model number changed from Sharp R-963.
	Whirlpool MT52	*280*	Independents	235	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Excellent microwave with lots of features, including steaming. Model number changed from Whirlpool MT 277.
Discontinued or significantly altered Best Buys Sanyo EM-G4752, Daewoo KOG 390A						
TUMBLE DRIERS Last report September 2000 Next report November 2003						
Sensor driers	Creda T632 CW	270	Comet	239	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Easy to use. Model number changed from Creda Excel T602 CW.
Discontinued or significantly altered Best Buys Hotpoint Ultima TC71						
WASHING MACHINES Last report January 2003 Next report January 2004						
Front loaders	Zanussi Jetsystem 1200 Xtra Capacity FJ1254W	249	Comet	249	comet.co.uk	Washes well. Model number will change to Zanussi Jetsystem1200 Xtra Capacity FJR 1254 W, with alterations to machine's appearance
Discontinued or significantly altered Best Buys Bosch WFO2464GB/01 Exxcel 1200, Miele Novotronic W 864, Siemens WXLM112GB/04 Extraklasse 1100						
VACUUM CLEANERS Last report April 2003 Next update October 2003						
Cylinder	Bosch BSG 82000 Ergomaxx	150	Currys	124	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	Not great for pet hair or smooth hard floors but a good choice for cleaning carpets or floors with crevices.
	Miele Cylinder Cat & Dog 700 S716	169	John Lewis	145	hughesdirect.co.uk/which	The clear winner in our tests. Great all-round cleaner and good at getting rid of pet hair. Also the easiest machine on test to use.
Upright	Hitachi CV81D	*90*	Independents	see[1]	see[1]	Not nearly as good as the cylinder Best Buys, but our choice of upright.

Where no high-street-chain price was found, a guide price is given in *italics*. Phone the manufacturer for local stockists (contact details are on p58). Internet prices include delivery. **1** These items aren't available from the internet sites we surveyed

NEXT MONTH TV and music Best Buys

Most of the children in our trial preferred the Mountain Like-A-Bike

Balancing act

Like-A-Bike (£145 for the Mountain version, £130 for Racer) is a play bike from Germany designed to introduce children to cycling. It's aimed at children aged two to six who can't yet ride a proper bike. The theory is that it helps children learn to balance, so they should be able to go straight to a normal two-wheeler without having to use stabilisers. Like-A-Bike has no pedals – children sit on it and run along, picking their feet up off the ground to practise balance.

There are two types: Mountain has pneumatic tyres, a rear mudguard and four seat settings between 32 and 41cm. Racing has solid tyres, no mudguard, and the seat can be adjusted to three levels between 33 and 39cm. Both are made from birch plywood and can be used indoors and out. We asked several children aged between two and five to try out Like-A-Bike to find out what they and their parents thought.

The Racer version of Like-A-Bike

All parents agreed it was easy to adjust and the instructions were easy to use. The younger children, aged between two and three, both liked the bike. The nearly three-year-old took to it and could really get up some speed. The two-year-old wasn't big enough to get the best out of it yet, but was slowly getting better as he grew. The older children, aged between four and five (none of whom could ride a bike without stabilisers), all quickly learned how to use Like-A-Bike. All the older children tried both designs, and all but one preferred the Mountain type. Two of the girls found the seats uncomfortable.

For children younger than two there are some places fingers and thumbs might get trapped. But it's completely safe when used with the recommended age group.

Overall, the children were divided in their opinion of Like-A-Bike: the younger children generally loved it, but some of the older ones found it boring and babyish. However, the parents all agreed that Like-A-Bike is a good concept, would help children learn to ride a bike and is well made. It is pricey, though. See 'Contacts', p58, for stockists.

roundup

NO MORE PLASTIC POTS

Homebase has started selling 'Compots' – reusable, biodegradable plant pots. They look like plastic, but are made from starch, cellulose and vegetable oil, and they break down into water and carbon dioxide when they're composted.

They're on sale in Homebase stores until the end of this month. They're being sold with vegetable plants for the same cost as plastic pots. The tomatoes cost 99p, all others cost 89p. We're going to buy a few and report back next year on how well they biodegrade.

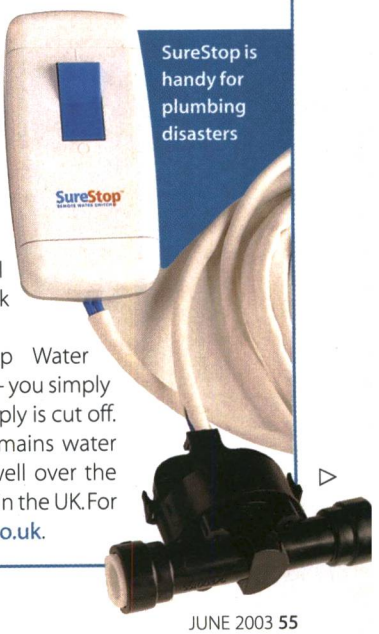
SWITCH OFF YOUR WATER WITH EASE

Ever had a plumbing emergency and had to switch off your mains water supply in a hurry? If so, you'll know that scrabbling about under the sink looking for the mains stopcock can be a real pain. And even when you find it, it might be jammed through infrequent use. This can be particularly difficult if you have restricted movement or are disabled.

A new product, the SureStop Remote Water Switch (£27 from B&Q and independents) makes turning your mains water supply on and off as simple as flicking a switch. It works entirely off water pressure, so no electricity is involved.

Fitting it should be straightforward for most DIYers and involves cutting a 6cm section from your mains supply pipe (after the water has been shut off) and connecting the valve with push-fit couplings. A length of tubing then links the valve to an on/off switch suitably positioned where you can get to it easily in an emergency – a maximum of 4m from the valve (or 8m with extension). The tubing can run along the surface of the wall or be buried in a channel dug into it and then plastered over – the latter will look neater but will obviously involve far more work when fitting it.

Once installed, the SureStop Water Remote Switch is very easy to use – you simply flick the switch and the mains supply is cut off. We tried it out with a variety of mains water pressures and found it worked well over the range of pressures typically found in the UK. For more details, visit www.surestop.co.uk.



SureStop is handy for plumbing disasters

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN TRENHOLM

Use this page to find a Best Buy for your savings

SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

Our **easy-access accounts** are run by post, telephone or internet. With most you have to wait a few days to get at your savings – until either the cheque arrives or the money has been transferred to another account. If you need instant access to your money, you should choose an account that has a cash card.

Our Best Buy **notice accounts** require a maximum of 90 days' notice. We give Best Buys for four levels of savings. Choose an account in **red** for the amount nearest to your level of savings.

We also show **how the account is run**, the **minimum initial deposit** and, for notice accounts, the **notice** period you need to give. All our Best Buys are available nationally. But it's worth checking the rates paid by smaller building societies in your area. Institutions change their rates fairly often, so check that your account is still competitive at least every six months.

		INTEREST (%) GROSS[1]						
	How account is run	£100	£1,000	£5,000	£10,000	Min initial deposit(£)	Notice (days)	Cash card
EASY-ACCESS								
Abbey National eSaver	internet		4.00[2]	4.00[2]	4.00[2]	500		✓
Cahoot Savings	internet	3.83	3.83	3.83	3.83	1		
Goldfish Savings	post/tel	3.40	3.40	3.55	3.80	1		
Halifax Web Saver	internet	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	1		
ING Direct Savings Account	post/tel/net	4.22	4.22	4.22	4.22	1		
Newcastle BS Net Savings	internet		3.65	3.65	3.80	1,000		
Northern Rock Tracker Online	internet	4.10[3]	4.10[3]	4.10[3]	4.10[3]	1		
Scottish Widows Instant Transfer	post/tel	3.75[4]	3.75[4]	3.75[4]	3.80[4]	100		
NOTICE								
Chelsea BS Call-Direct 40 II	postal/tel			4.20[5]	4.20[5]	2,500	40	
Manchester BS Classic III	branch			4.15[6]	4.15[6]	2,500	75	
Nottingham BS Post It	postal		4.35[7]	4.35[7]	4.35[7]	1,000	90	
Safeway Postal Notice	postal		4.00	4.00	4.00	500	60	
Scarborough BS Scarborough 80 III	postal/tel	4.20[8]	4.20[8]	4.20[8]	4.20[8]	100	80	

1 Rate before tax 2 Includes a variable bonus (currently 0.35 per cent) payable for first six months 3 Includes a bonus of 0.1 per cent payable for first six months 4 Includes a bonus of 0.5 per cent payable for first six months 5 Includes a bonus of 0.45 per cent payable to 31 December 2003 6 Includes a bonus of 0.6 per cent payable for first six months 7 Includes a bonus of 0.65 per cent payable for one year 8 Includes a bonus of 0.95 per cent payable for first six months

All rates correct at 13 May 2003 Based on data supplied at www.moneyfacts.co.uk

MINI CASH ISAS

All our Best Buy mini cash Isas are available nationally and have a notice period of 90 days or less. For amounts up to £999, they also have a minimum deposit of £10 or less. Choose an account highlighted in **red** for the amount nearest your savings.

✓ indicates that the Isa meets the government's **Cat standards**. Isas usually have tiered **interest rates** depending on your balance. Some providers currently offer bonuses on top of these rates as an incentive to attract new investors. In calculating our Best Buys, we've excluded bonuses. But if you're willing to switch when the bonus ends, consider Isas that include bonuses. We also show the **minimum initial deposit**, any **notice period** and whether the account **accepts transfers** from other Isas. Most of the Best Buys offer the same rates for their Tessa-only Isas.

		INTEREST (%) GROSS						
	Cat standard	£0-£2,999	£3,000-£5,999	£6,000-£8,999	£9,000+	Minimum initial deposit (£)	Notice (days)	Accepts transfers
Abbey National			3.50	3.85	4.15	3,000		✓
B'ham Midshires	✓	3.40	3.90	4.10	4.10	1		✓
Buckinghamshire BS		3.50[1]	3.85	4.10	4.20	100		✓
Intelligent Finance	✓	4.05	4.05	4.05	4.05	1		✓
Kent Reliance BS	✓	4.20	4.20	4.20	4.20	1		✓
Lloyds TSB	✓	3.00[2]	4.00	4.00	4.25	10		✓
RBS		3.05[3]	3.85	4.10	4.20	1	60	
Safeway	✓	4.20	4.20	4.20	4.20	10		✓
Scarborough BS		3.80	3.90	4.00	4.00	10		✓
Shepshed BS		4.20	4.20	4.20	4.20	100	60	✓
Skipton BS		2.75	4.10	4.10	4.10	500	30	
Tipton & Coseley BS	✓	4.05	4.05	4.05	4.05	1	7	

1 3.5 per cent paid on balances of £1,000 to £2,999 2 3.25 per cent paid on balances from £1,000 to £2,999 3 3.45 per cent paid on balances from £500 to £2,999

All rates correct at 13 May 2003 Based on data supplied at www.moneyfacts.co.uk

REGULAR SAVINGS

We list all the regular savings accounts that are nationally available. Our Best Buys (shown in red) pay better rates than those on comparable notice accounts. But when choosing our Best Buys we also consider flexibility – whether the accounts allow any missed deposits or withdrawals, say. Choose an account for the amount closest to your level of savings.

We show the annual interest rate before tax (including bonuses) on balances of £100, £1,000 and £2,500. Most accounts pay the same rate, however much you save.

We give the minimum and maximum payments you can make each month. (Unless footnoted, the amount you need to open an account is the same as the minimum monthly payment.) We show how many times a year you can miss deposits, how many withdrawals you can make without losing the interest bonus, and whether you can make extra payments in addition to your regular monthly account. Term is how long the account runs for (where there is no entry, it means there is no set term).

	INTEREST (% GROSS)			DEPOSITS (£)		CONDITIONS			
	£100	£1,000	£2,500	Min payment (£)	Max payment (£)	Miss deposits	Withdrawals	Extra payments	Term (years)
Bath BS	4.10	4.10	4.10	10	200	0	1		5
Beverley BS	4.60	4.60	4.60	10	150	0	0		5
Birmingham Midshires	4.55	4.55	4.55	20	1,000	0	0		
Britannia BS	4.15	4.15	4.15	20	500	0	1		
Coventry BS	4.50	4.50	4.50	10	250	2	0		3
Furness BS	4.70	4.70	4.70	50	200	2	0		5
Halifax	4.70	4.70	4.70	5	500	1	1		
Hanley Economic BS	4.70	4.70	4.70	25	1,000	2	1		
Leeds & Holbeck BS	5.00	5.00	5.00	20	250	0	1		
Monmouthshire BS	4.65	4.65	4.65	20	1,000	0	0		
Scarborough BS	4.20	4.20	4.20	20	250	0	0		3
Skipton BS	4.50	4.50	4.50	25	500	2	1		
Yorkshire BS	4.40	4.40	4.40	10	100	0	0		3

All rates correct at 13 May 2003 Based on data supplied at www.moneyfacts.co.uk

REQUEST A TEST
If you've seen something new you'd like us to test, email us at **allchange@which.net**

PLASMA TVS – ARE THEY WORTH THE PRICE?

Most plasma screens are widescreen and can be mounted on a wall – perfect for home cinema

Many of you have written to us asking whether plasma TVs are worth buying. We're planning our first tests on them later this year but, if you can't wait until then, here's a brief introduction.

The main attraction of plasma TVs is their flatter 'panel' screen. They can be mounted on a wall, which means you can comfortably have a larger screen in your living room without the prohibitively large, heavy cabinet you'd have with a standard TV. Nearly all plasma TVs are widescreen (16:9) format, and screen sizes range from 32in to 61in. Most major television manufacturers have a range of plasma screens.

Plasma screens are digital, and each pixel is individually controlled by the signal. It doesn't mean, however, that they're equipped to receive digital TV broadcasts (such as cable, Freeview and Sky), and most screens don't come with any TV tuner built in. Therefore, you'll probably need to use them with a separate tuner, set-top box or VCR to watch normal broadcasts.

Each pixel in a plasma screen contains gases, which react to the electrical picture signal to create the light that forms the image. Because every pixel is individually lit, plasma screens usually produce bright pictures with vivid colours. Image quality is good, although not quite as natural at that found on a good-quality standard TV. Images on plasma screens have a wide viewing angle, so you can see clearly from most positions in the room.

The main drawback of plasma screens is cost – from £2,500 to over £10,000 – although prices are likely to fall. However, plasma screens need to prove themselves before they catch on. They're fragile products that need careful handling, installation and care. They also have a limited life, as the pixel cells lose brightness with age. If used continuously, their life span can be as short as four years but, under typical consumer use, it remains to be seen how long they will last.

Several reports have also emerged to suggest plasma screens can suffer a 'memory effect', which means that a bright, stationary image (such as digital TV channel logos) left on screen for a few hours can cause a permanent 'ghost' image. Although many manufacturers acknowledge this problem, it often isn't covered by their warranties. So, if it happens, you're likely to have to pay to get it fixed by a service engineer.

We're reserving judgement on plasma screens until we publish our first test findings in October. We're also planning to do our first tests on some of the other new types of TV and digital projectors available. But for now, we suggest you don't go switching...

Graduate to a better bank

GRADUATE ACCOUNTS	ACCOUNT DETAILS				
ISSUER	Interest-free overdraft limit first year (£)	Interest-free overdraft limit second year (£)	Interest-free overdraft limit third year (£)	Authorised overdraft rate (%)[1]	Credit interest rate (%)
Abbey National	2,000	1,000	500	8.7	0.1
Bank of Ireland (NI)	1,000[2]	1,000			0
Bank of Scotland	2,000			9.1[5]	1.26
Barclays[3]	1,500	1,000		15.6	0.1
First Trust	1,000	1,000	1,000	see[4]	0
HSBC	1,500	1,000	500[6]	14.8	0.1
Lloyds TSB Graduate[7]	2,000	1,500	1,000	14.8	0
Lloyds TSB Graduate Gold[7]	2,000	2,000	2,000	14.8	2
NatWest	2,000[8]	1,000	500	17.81	0.1
The Royal Bank of Scotland	2,000[8]			14	2.02
Ulster Bank Post Grad Study	1,500	1,500		5.9[5]	0
Ulster Bank Full Time Employment	1,500			5.9[5]	0

Details correct at 18 April 2003 **1** Applies to agreed overdrafts above interest-free limit **2** Interest-free overdraft available when graduate starts work **3** Graduates can switch to account only when in full-time employment or have a full-time job offer **4** Negotiable **5** Variable interest rate linked to the Bank Base Rate **6** From 1 July 2003, this will be extended for up to two years for existing student customers who have studied for four years or more **7** Available from 7 July 2003. Graduate Gold is free for new customers for one year then £4 per month till August 2004, £8 thereafter **8** Alternatively offers an interest-free loan to repay overdraft

When you graduate, sorting out your finances is just one of the challenges you face. With a good range of graduate bank accounts on offer, however, it could be worth looking at other options rather than staying with your student bank. All of the banks in our table allow you to switch to their graduate package from another bank, so take the time to choose an account that suits your circumstances.

It's likely that you'll have debts when you graduate, so the main attraction of these accounts is their interest-free overdraft. All of them offer one, although the amount and availability varies. A couple of banks offer the same overdraft for each of three years, others decrease the amount each year. Lloyds TSB has the most generous interest-free overdraft offer of £2,000 in the first year after graduating, £1,500 in the second, and £1,000 in the third. Abbey National and Natwest also offer good deals of £2,000 falling to £1,000 then £500. If you think your borrowing is likely to exceed interest-free limits, then consider the authorised overdraft rate, as this does vary.

Lloyds TSB also has a packaged account, Graduate Gold. This comes with a £2,000 interest-free overdraft for three years as well as extra benefits including annual travel insurance. However, as there is a monthly fee for this account, it's probably only worth considering if you think you'll make good use of the extras on offer.

From 1 July, students who have studied for at least four years and keep their account with HSBC will be able to extend the terms of the graduate account, including the £500 interest-free overdraft in the third year after graduation, for up to two extra years.

As an alternative to interest-free overdrafts, NatWest and The Royal Bank of Scotland offer an interest-free loan to pay off your overdraft. This could be a good option if you think that structured repayments will help you to manage your debt.

CONTACTS

Use these contacts and links to save time when shopping around. For further information, use the links in the article itself. Links are also given on our website – www.which.co.uk/whichextra. You can visit any of the sites listed by going to the site and choosing the 'Web links' feature from the 'Extras' menu

ALL CHANGE (p53)
Homebase 0870 900 8098
www.homebase.co.uk
Like-A-Bike (Kinetics)
0141 942 2552
www.kinetics.org.uk
SureStop Water Switches
0121 782 5777
www.surestop.co.uk
Graduate accounts
Abbey National 0845 608 0200
www.abbeynational.co.uk/youth-home
Bank of Ireland (NI)
0800 0850 444
www.bankofireland.co.uk
Bank of Scotland
0500 31 31 11
www.bankofscotland.co.uk
Barclays Local branch
www.barclays.co.uk
First Trust 028 90 325599
www.firsttrustbank.co.uk
HSBC 08457 404 404
www.hsbc.co.uk
Lloyds TSB
www.lloydstsb.com/graduate
NatWest 0800 761 033
www.natwest.com/graduates
The Royal Bank of Scotland
0808 1000 148
www.rbs.co.uk
Ulster Bank Local branch
www.ulsterbank.com
Self-cleaning windows
The glass is available from local suppliers; details are available on the company's website: http://www.pilkington.co.uk/international+products/activ/uk/english/partners/default.htm

BARBECUES (p14)
Australian Barbecue Company
01462 744500
www.leisuregrow.com
Barbecook
info@barbecook.com
www.barbecook.com
Beefmaster 01462 744500
www.leisuregrow.com
Brinkman 01200 442299
www.barbequick.com
Campingaz 01275 845024
www.campingaz.com
Char-Broil 01622 677244
www.charbroil.com
European Outdoor Chef
01249 814111
www.outdoorchef.co.uk
Imperial 0239 2248500
www.imperialbarbecues.co.uk
Nipoori 01200 442299
www.barbequick.com
Outback 01622 671771
www.outbackuk.com
Rotal (Premier Decorations)
020 8624 5656
www.rotalbarby.co.uk
Sterling 0151 336 6464
Sunshine 01865 884433
www.sunshinebbq.co.uk
Weber 01756 692600
www.weber.com

BEST BUY MONITOR (p54)
Dishwashers
Bosch 0870 727 0446
www.boschappliances.co.uk
Whirlpool 0870 600 8989
www.whirlpool.co.uk
Zanussi 08705 727 727
www.zanussi.co.uk
Freezers
AEG 08705 350 350
www.aeg.co.uk
Bosch 0870 727 0446
www.boschappliances.co.uk
Electrolux 08705 950 950
www.electrolux.co.uk
Hotpoint 08701 506 070
www.hotpoint.co.uk
Miele 01235 554 455
www.miele.co.uk
Zanussi 08705 727 727
www.zanussi.co.uk
Fridge/freezers
Samsung 0870 242 0303
www.samsungelectronics.co.uk
Fridges
Beko 01923 818 121
www.beko.co.uk
Bosch 0870 727 0446
www.boschappliances.co.uk
Haier 01527 578 333
www.haiereurope.com
Lec 01243 863 161
www.lec.co.uk
Siemens 0870 240 0070
www.siemensappliances.co.uk
Microwaves
LG 0870 607 5544
www.lgelectronics.co.uk
Samsung 0870 242 0303
www.samsungelectronics.co.uk
Sharp 0800 262 958
www.sharp.co.uk
Whirlpool 0870 600 8989
www.whirlpool.co.uk
Tumble driers
Creda 08701 54 64 74
www.creda.co.uk
Washing machines
Zanussi 08705 727 727
www.zanussi.co.uk
Vacuum cleaners
Bosch 0870 727 0446
www.boschappliances.co.uk
Hitachi 01628 643 000
www.hitachidigitalmedia.com
Miele 01235 554 455
www.miele.co.uk

BIG BANKS (p24)
Best Buys
Abbey National (current account) 0800 731 7774
www.abbeynational.co.uk
Bank of Scotland 0500 31 31 11 (current account and easy access savings)
www.bankofscotland.co.uk
Capital One Bank (credit cards) 0800 952 5452 (application enquiries)
www.capitalone.co.uk
Coventry BS 0845 7665522 – choose 'mortgages' option (buildings insurance)
www.coventrybuildingsociety.co.uk
Direct Line 0845 246 8163 (loans)
www.directline.com
Direct Travel 01903 812345 (travel insurance)
www.direct-travel.co.uk
Halifax 08457 20 30 40 (current account)
www.halifax.co.uk
Help the Aged
0800 41 31 80
(buildings and contents insurance)
www.helptheaged.org.uk
HSBC 0800 299 299 (mini cash Isas)
www.hsbc.co.uk
Legal & General 0800 324 252 (contents Insurance)
www.legalandgeneral.co.uk
Shepshed BS 01509 822000 (mortgages)
www.theshepshed.co.uk

CHILD CAR SEATS (p34)
Argos 0870 600 3030
www.argos.co.uk
Bébé Confort (Ampa UK Ltd)
01484 401802
Brevi 01630 638978
www.brevi.co.uk
Britax 01264 386034
www.britax.co.uk
Chicco 01623 750870
www.chicco.co.uk
Graco 01604 875557
www.graco.co.uk
Mamas & Papas
01484 438222
www.mamasandpapas.co.uk
Maxi Cosi (Dorel Juvenile Group UK) 020 8236 0707
Mothercare 0845 3304030
www.mothercare.com
Other useful contacts
The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA)
www.rospa.com
also at:
www.childcarsafety.org.uk

ESTATE AGENTS (p10)
The Independent Association of Estate Agents (also gives free advice to consumers on estate agents) 01179 074 784
www.iaea.co.uk
The National Association of Estate Agents 01926 496800
www.naea.co.uk
The Office of Fair Trading
08457 224499
www.oft.gov.uk
The Ombudsman for Estate Agents 01722 333306
www.oea.co.uk

MOBILE ROAMING (p48)
Most providers have a customer service number for their customers to dial direct from their mobile phone. The following numbers are for non-customers or for calls made by existing customers from other phones.
British Gas 0845 600 6311
www.house.co.uk
BT Mobile Sense
08708 508 811
www.bt.com
Dial-a-Phone 0800 0928 244
www.dialaphone.co.uk
O2 08705 214000
www.O2.co.uk
One Tel 0800 957 1100
www.onetel.co.uk
Orange 0500 80 20 80
www.orange.co.uk
Singlepoint 4u
(you have to be a customer) 0870 9000700
www.singlepoint4u.co.uk
T-Mobile 0845 412 5000
www.T-Mobile.co.uk
Telecom Plus 020 8955 5555
www.telecomplus.org.uk
Virgin 0845 6000 070
www.virgin.com
Vodafone 07836 191 191
www.vodafone.co.uk

RUNNING SHOES (p19)
Adidas 0870 240 4204
www.adidas.com
Asics 01925 243360
www.asics.co.uk
Brooks 01903 817009
www.brooksrunning.co.uk
Mizuno 0118 936 2148
www.mizunoeurope.com
New Balance 0800 389 1055
www.newbalance.co.uk
Nike 0800 056 1640
www.nikebowerman.com
Puma 01924 425500
www.puma.co.uk
Reebok 0800 305050
www.reebok.co.uk
Saucony 02392 823664
www.saucony.co.uk
For more about ethical issues
Clean Clothes Campaign
01603 610993

SAVINGS MONITOR (p56)
Mini cash Isas
Abbey National
0845 6000181
www.abbeynational.co.uk
Birmingham Midshires
0845 6022828
www.askbm.co.uk
Buckinghamshire BS
01494 879500
www.bucksbuildingsociety.co.uk
Intelligent Finance (IF)
0845 609 4343
www.if.com
Kent Reliance BS
0800 783 4248
www.krbs.co.uk
Lloyds TSB Local branch
www.lloydstsb.co.uk
The Royal Bank of Scotland
0808 1009510
www.rbs.co.uk
Safeway 0800 995 995
www.safeway.co.uk
Scarborough BS
0845 458 4458
www.scarboroughbs.co.uk
Shepshed BS 01509 822000
www.theshepshed.co.uk
Skipton BS 0800 446776
www.skipton.co.uk
Tipton & Coseley BS
0121 557 2551
www.thetipton.co.uk
Regular savings
Bath BS 01225 423271
www.bibs.co.uk
Beverley BS 01482 881510
www.beverleybs.co.uk
Birmingham Midshires
0845 972 0721
www.askbm.co.uk
Britannia BS 0800 132304
www.britannia.co.uk
Coventry BS 0845 766 5522
www.coventrybuildingsociety.co.uk
Furness BS 0800 220568
www.furnessbs.co.uk
Halifax 0845 726 3646
www.halifax.co.uk
Hanley Economic BS
0870 7455454
www.thehanley.co.uk
Leeds & Holbeck BS
0500 225777
www.leeds-holbeck.co.uk
Monmouthshire BS
01633 844402
www.monbsoc.co.uk

INDEX

Online Which? Extra has a full archive of *Which?* reports published since July 2000. Just log on to **www.which.co.uk/whichextra** and navigate the easy-to-follow categories, or use the search engine to find the advice you want.

By phone Alternatively, ring our Members' Helpline on **0845 307 4000.** The team will be able to tell you when we last reported on a topic or when our next report is due.

In print See p55 of the December 2002 issue for our last full index to reports published in *Which?* during 2002.

MEMBERS' HELPLINE

Our Members' Helpline team is on hand Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 8pm and from 9am to 1pm Saturdays and bank holidays. You can use our helpline to check you have the latest Best Buy information, to order factsheets, to find a past *Which?* article or check when we'll next be reporting on that subject, or to ask us your other queries about *Which?* or Consumers' Association. Whenever you contact our Helpline team, please include your *Which?* membership number and a daytime phone number. So that we can go on improving our services, some calls will be silently monitored and recorded to help identify training needs.

CORRECTIONS

'ROLL WITH IT', April 2003, p10
The manufacturer's guide price for the Biofa Ecosol paint is £16. Biofa paints list all their ingredients.

'DON'T LET IT FLOW', April 2003, p47
The Aquaflow costs £11. It doesn't change between flow levels automatically as you open the tap – you have to change the rate at the flow restrictor.

'BROADBAND VIA SATELLITE' May 2003, p57
Kbps stands for kilobits per second, not kilobytes per second, as stated in the paragraph headed 'Moving up a gear'.

BEST BUY COMPETITION RULES

Our Best Buy competition is open only to current members of *Which?*. Only one entry per household. Entries received from 3 June to 29 June 2003 will be entered into the competition. Winners will be informed in writing by 18 July 2003. The first ten winners drawn with the correct answer will receive an Outback Trooper gas barbecue. If the model offered is not available, an equivalent will be given. Winners are not eligible for a cash equivalent. A list of winners will be available from BB June 03, Which?, Castlemead, Gascoyne Way, Hertford X, SG14 1LH after 31 July 2003 (please include an SAE). Those under 18 years of

next month in WHICH?

Scarborough BS 0845 458 4458
www.scarboroughbs.co.uk
Skipton BS 0800 446776
www.skiptonbs.co.uk
Yorkshire BS 0845 120 0100
www.ybs.co.uk
Savings accounts
Abbey National 0800 174635
www.abbeynational.co.uk
Cahoot www.cahoot.com
Chelsea BS 0800 272505
www.chelseabs.co.uk
Goldfish www.goldfish.com
Halifax 08457 263646
www.halifax.co.uk
ING Direct 0800 376 8844
www.ingdirect.co.uk
Manchester BS 0161 833 8880
www.themanchester.co.uk
Newcastle BS
www.newcastlenet.co.uk
Northern Rock 08702 400704
www.northernrock.co.uk
Nottingham BS 0800 083 5565
www.thenottingham.com
Safeway 0800 995995
www.safeway.co.uk
Scarborough BS 0845 458 4458
www.scarboroughbs.co.uk
Scottish Widows 0845 845 0829
www.scottishwidows.co.uk

SCREWCAPPED WINE (p28)
Asda 0500 100055
www.asda.co.uk
Majestic 01923 298 200
www.majestic.co.uk
Oddbins 0800 328 2323
www.oddbins.com
Tesco 0800 505555
www.tesco.com
Unwins 01322 272711
www.unwins.co.uk
Waitrose 0800 188884
www.waitrose.com

SINGLE-USE CAMERAS (p41)
Agfa 020 82314985
www.agfa.co.uk
Fujifilm 0207 4655864
www.fujifilm.co.uk
Ilford 01565 683998
www.ilford.com
Jazz 02087557950
www.weddingcameras.co.uk
Kodak 01442 845710
www.kodak.co.uk
Konica 02087516121
www.konica.co.uk
Minolta 01908 200400
www.minolta.co.uk
Polaroid 01530 830000
www.concordcam.com
Supasnaps 0870 8402001
www.supasnaps.co.uk
Tesco 0800 505555
www.tesco.com

age and employees of Which? Ltd, its associated companies and suppliers are not eligible to enter any *Which?* competition. Members of their immediate families (namely spouse, children, parents, siblings) are also ineligible, as is anyone living in the employee's household.

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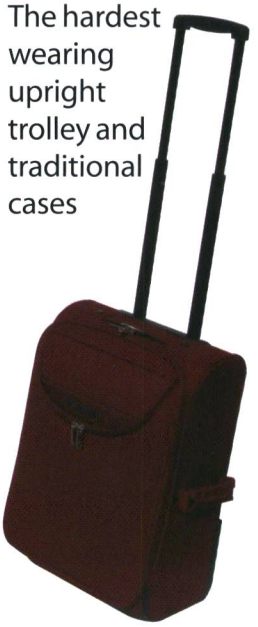
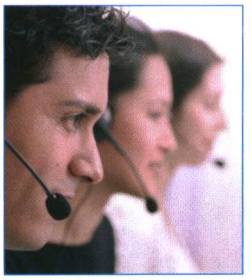
CAR CRIME
Where does your car rank in our security league tables?

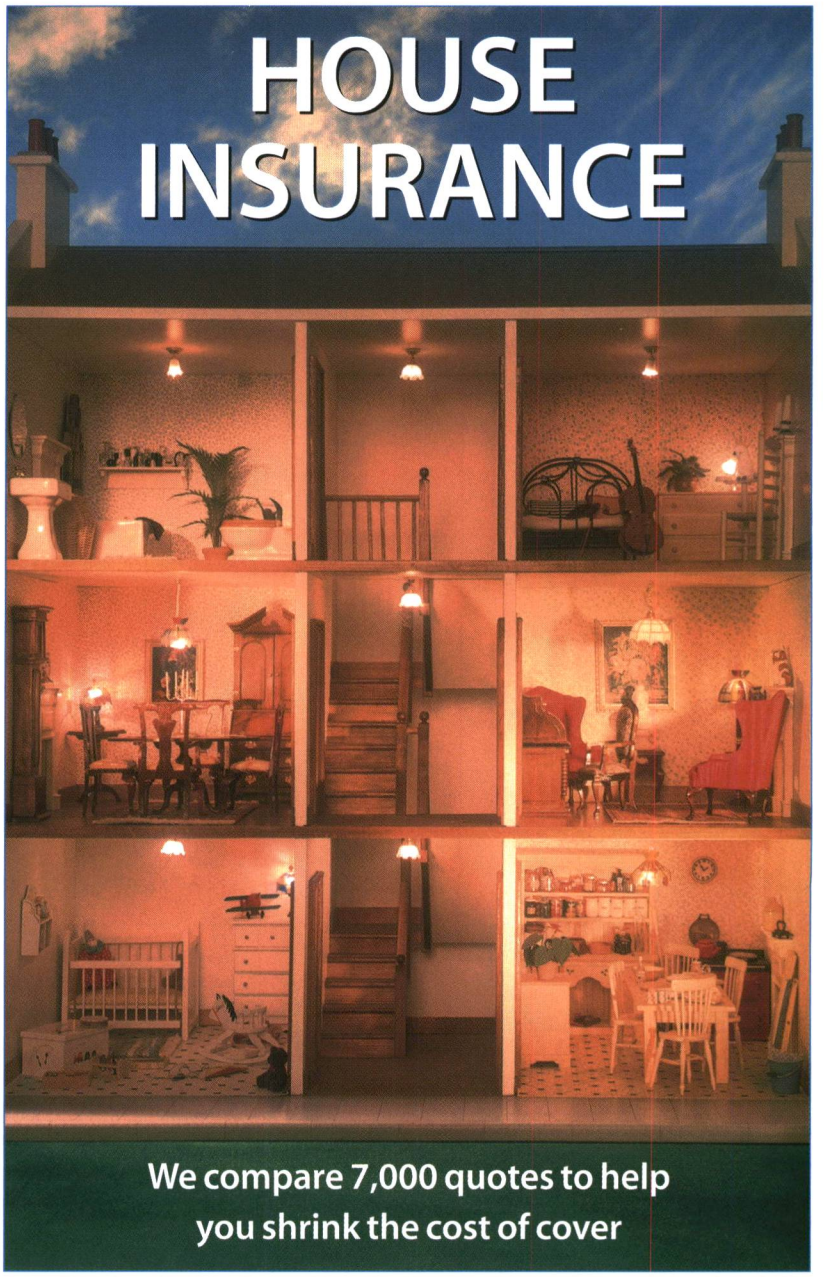
BEST BUY BAGS
The hardest wearing upright trolley and traditional cases



YOUR CALL
What you really think of customer call centres



PHOTOGRAPHY ALAMY, GETTYONE STONE



NHS Direct How fast and accurate is the advice?

Printers Lasers on test plus Best Buy colour inkjets

Built-in ovens 12 of the latest models on test

Serps 15 years on, we ask: was it best to opt out?

Coming soon Broadband compared; **Batteries**; Duvets; **Equity release mortgages**; Portable stereos with CD, cassette and radio; **Most reliable cars**; Genetic testing; **Car polishes**; Central heating boilers; **Best Buy car insurance**; Pesticides
PLUS Which? Car 2003 – your free 68-page guide

briefcases

Two recent cases from our lawyers' files

LUNCH IS OFF, SIR

When Iain Baillie, of Amersham, received an invitation to spend 'two nights of sheer luxury for only £229' in one of the sumptuous suites of the acclaimed five-star One Devonshire Gardens hotel in Glasgow, he couldn't refuse. The offer included a full Scottish breakfast, a three-course lunch plus coffee, and return flights for two. All Iain and his wife Joan had to do was attend a presentation on the 'innovative and highly flexible concept in time ownership' that the Residents International Owners Club (part of the Residents International Group) was giving at the hotel.

Iain's offer changed significantly when the company collapsed

As stipulated in the terms and conditions of the offer, Iain booked through Lonsdale travel agents, paying an extra £145 to stay a third night. He paid a total of £374 with his Halifax Visa credit card.

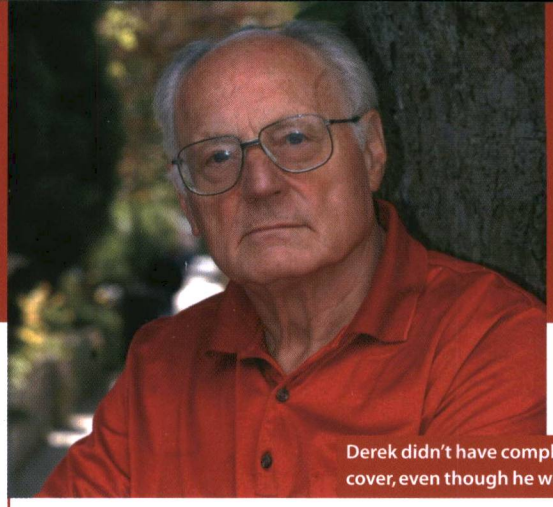
Before the Baillies could take up the offer, the Residents International Group went into liquidation. The receivers wouldn't honour the contract in full: they replaced the full breakfast with a continental one, withdrew the free lunch, and refused to honour Iain's booking for the extra night. Iain complained, returned his tickets to Lonsdale and asked for his money back.

Iain then wrote to Halifax, reminding it of its joint liability with the supplier for breaches of contract under section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act. It refused to accept liability on the grounds that he had cancelled while the offer still stood – even though what he would be getting was now significantly less than what he had paid for. Iain came to us.

We wrote to Halifax setting out a claim for breach of contract. Halifax said that its agreement was with Lonsdale and the Baillies, not Residents International, which had committed the breach, so it wasn't bound by section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act. The terms and conditions named Lonsdale as an agent for Residents International, which brought Halifax into the claim. Halifax stood its ground but, threatened with court action, it finally agreed to settle in full.

POINT OF LAW

If a company goes bankrupt before it can fulfil a contract, you may be able to sue the credit card company for breach of contract.



Derek didn't have complete insurance cover, even though he was told he did

HIRE CAR CAPER IN CAPETOWN

Derek Seel hired a car from Avis Rent a Car, Hayes, Middlesex, to use on a cross-country driving holiday in South Africa. He and his wife would be covering many miles, so Derek specifically asked for a car with a radio cassette player. He paid £671 with his Barclaycard for a Toyota Camry 2.0Si, after Avis assured him that the car had the feature he wanted. He was also told that he had full insurance cover.

When Derek and his wife arrived in Capetown, there was no suitable Toyota waiting for them. Avis gave them a Chrysler instead. However, there were substantial problems with the steering and suspension of this car and Derek had difficulty driving it. In addition, he was unable to use the radio cassette player. As a result, the Seels' holiday was spoilt.

Derek complained to the local Avis at the next big city he came to. He was offered other, equally unsuitable, cars before settling on a Hyundai Sonata that he kept for the rest of the trip.

When Derek returned the Hyundai, Avis told him it was damaged. It added that the Chrysler he'd returned previously was also damaged. Without Derek's knowledge, Avis took £1,012 from his First Direct credit card account – Derek had given Avis details of this account when he collected his first car.

POINT OF LAW

Where a supplier commits a misrepresentation and/or breach of contract, you may be able to claim compensation as well as recovering any unauthorised transactions.

Back in England, Derek wrote to the Hayes branch of Avis asking why this money had been deducted from his account. It told him that he hadn't been fully insured. Dissatisfied with this response, Derek asked us for help.

We wrote to Avis, setting out a claim for breach of contract on three counts: that the car supplied was not of satisfactory quality; that it didn't match the description; and that the full insurance protection clause had not been honoured. We also wrote to Barclaycard and First Direct, as credit card companies have joint liability with suppliers. Barclaycard and First Direct finally refunded Derek in full.

WHICH? legal service

You never know when you might need legal advice. Join Which? Legal Service and you'll get unlimited phone access to some of the UK's top consumer lawyers providing you with help and legal advice whenever you need it. If your case requires written action, we can handle that too for a very competitive fee. Call free on 0800 252 100 for an information pack. The number for existing Which? Legal Service members is 01992 822 828.

PHOTOGRAPHY NEIL PHILIPS, JOHN TRENHOLM